

THE MISSING SUBMARINE

by *Franklin*



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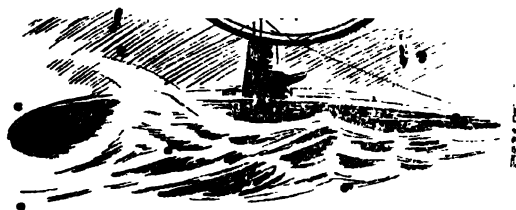
What this story is about :

At a time when the Admiralty was agitated by the sudden disappearance of a prototype nuclear submarine, the chief concern of Tiger Ransome and Snort Kenton, midshipmen aboard H.M. Frigate *Watchful*, was their forthcoming seamanship examination. Only a miracle, it seemed, would give them the coveted first class pass. As it happened, a storm in the Channel provided a chance for them to prove their seamanship, and was also the first link in a series of events which led at last to the recovery of the missing submarine.



THE MISSING SUBMARINE

by ~~“Sea-Lion”~~



Illustrated by Harry Clarke

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CHAPTER ONE

The Rockingham Reactor

IT WAS a most unpleasant November evening, damp and clammy and very dirty underfoot. London's rush-hour traffic, buses, cars and taxis, had been reduced to a crawl by a fog through which headlights glowed like spectral eyes. As for pedestrians, jostling each other on the pavements, they huddled deep into their coat collars in an attempt to keep out the cold.

One of these, a grey-haired man wearing steel-rimmed spectacles, who carried an old leather brief-case, had considerable difficulty in groping his way. But at last he reached the entrance to the Admiralty and, when he glanced at his watch, was evidently relieved to find that it was no later than ten past five.

Passing through the Admiralty courtyard he paused in the hall to look at the statue of Nelson which stands there, a replica of the figure on the tall column in Trafalgar Square. Then he gave his name to one of the blue-uniformed messengers at the reception desk. It seemed that he was expected because he was immediately conducted into the lift and up to the first floor, thence along the corridor to a door which was clearly marked: THIRD SEA LORD.

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His guide knocked, then held the door open for him to pass inside. Vice-Admiral Sir Humphrey Dashwood, K.C.B., D.S.O., rose from his desk to grasp his visitor warmly by the hand.

"Professor Rockingham!" he cried. "By Jove, it's good to see you. Some of us were afraid you'd be held up by this beastly fog."

The distinguished physicist—Professor Rockingham's reputation as a scientist extended far beyond the boundaries of Britain—blinked absent-mindedly through his spectacles. "Fog?" he murmured. "Oh, yes. I do believe it's a little thick outside."

"Pea soup, man! Pea soup!" declared the admiral with characteristic bluntness. "But I knew you'd make it. You can depend on Rockingham, I told them." Though he worked now in an office in London as a member of the Board of Admiralty, Dashwood could never altogether drop the bluff manner he was accustomed to use on the quarterdecks of Her Majesty's ships. "So I said we'd wait for you, Rockingham," he continued. "They're all in the next room, anxious to hear your news, to know whether your invention is what we need."

The professor began to remove his overcoat. "Most flattering," he said, "most flattering."

"So come along, Rockingham, come along—this way," finished Admiral Dashwood as soon as his visitor was ready.

They went along the corridor together, sailor and scientist, into the next room. There as many as a dozen senior naval officers and civil servants were seated at a long conference table, though it was not

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easy to tell them apart because sailors and civilians alike were wearing plain clothes, as is usual in the Admiralty.

"You all know Professor Rockingham," Admiral Dashwood began by way of introduction, "but I'm not sure that he knows you."

So the admiral named them all, whilst Rockingham went round the table shaking hands. For two of those present he had a stiffer grip than the others because he was particularly glad that they were there. The first was Admiral Marley, the Navy's Engineer-in-Chief, the second Sir George Tracey, the Director of Naval Construction. Towards the rest his manner was vague, as if his thoughts were far away on other things.

But once these preliminaries were over and Admiral Dashwood had invited him to address the meeting, Professor Rockingham became a different person. He no longer appeared absent-minded; his words were precise, his manner effective. It took him the best part of an hour to describe his new invention; but within the first five minutes he had more than convinced his audience that he knew what he was talking about—not that they understood all of his explanation.

Admiral Dashwood certainly did not: he looked more and more puzzled at the scientific terms and formulae which the professor used. But out of courtesy he and the others had to be patient and keep silent until Rockingham had finished.

That time came at last. Displaying one final diagram on the blackboard, the great physicist con-

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cluded: "And so, gentlemen, I estimate an overall efficiency of ninety-two per cent—at a cost no greater than that of oil fuel. Add the ability to remain at sea almost indefinitely without refuelling and—well, gentlemen, you have the greatest revolution in naval warfare since the introduction of steam."

Rockingham peered at his audience through his steel-rimmed spectacles when he reached the end of his statement. What would their reactions be? Outside, Big Ben boomed faintly through the fog that swirled across the window-panes of the Admiralty. Then the Third Sea Lord cleared his throat with a discreet cough.

"Thank you, Rockingham," he said. It was not up to him to make a decision—not yet—not until he had heard the views of his advisers. He turned to the Director of Naval Construction. "Well, Tracey, what do you think? You'll have to build the thing."

Sir George Tracey toyed with his pencil and looked uncomfortable. "To be frank, sir," he replied, "Professor Rockingham's statement—parts of it, anyway—was above my head. It's probably crystal-clear to Marley here"—he nodded at the Navy's Engineer-in-Chief—"but it certainly isn't to me."

Admiral Dashwood's weatherbeaten face creased into a smile. "There speaks an honest man," he declared; then turned to the professor. "Look, Rockingham, as Third Sea Lord I'm responsible for seeing that the Navy gets the ships it needs. But I'm only a simple sailor. I gather you've invented a revolutionary method of ship propulsion, of special importance to submarines, which Marley approves—"

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"I most certainly do!" interjected the Engineer-in-Chief.

"—but which neither Tracey nor I understand enough to give it our support. So, Rockingham, I'm asking you to explain your idea in words of one syllable—if you'll forgive me for putting it that way. Just for once don't blind us with science."

The professor was not put out by this: he was used to having to explain his ideas to those to whom the latest inventions were like magic.

"But of course, Admiral, of course," he said, polishing his spectacles. "As you all know, we already have an atomic submarine. She has special turbines—capable of driving her at a speed of thirty knots—which are fed with steam from a boiler—"

"We had steam-driven submarines in the First World War, the old K-boats," Admiral Marley interposed.

"Precisely, precisely," agreed Rockingham fussily, for he disliked being interrupted. "But a fire is impossible in a *submerged* submarine, for want of oxygen. The solution is heat from nuclear fission. But atomic reactors are heavy and bulky, and the submarine has therefore to be a large one."

"Too large for inshore work," nodded Admiral Dashwood.

"My discovery overcomes that," announced Rockingham proudly, his deep-set eyes sparkling behind the thick lenses of his spectacles. "My reactor, gentlemen, is smaller and lighter—much smaller and much lighter—than the present ones. The turbo-jet which it drives is also small and light for the power it gives.

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Why, the whole plant takes up only half the space needed for the conventional diesel-electric method of submarine propulsion."

He sat down and began to fill his pipe, while once again he awaited his audience's reaction. He, least of all perhaps, was conscious that on the decision of the meeting depended the future of the British Navy.

The Third Sea Lord was beginning to understand. "It seems that your reactor, Rockingham, will give us what the Navy has needed for years—the true submarine which can operate anywhere in the world."

Admiral Marley nodded. "Thirty knots on the surface, twenty-five knots submerged, and enough fuel—plutonium—to last for ten years. It need only surface to replenish with torpedoes and provisions."

"And shore leave for the men!", grunted Admiral Dashwood. "Never forget that a ship is manned by sailors."

But this was not an aspect of the problem that interested the professor. "Your decision, Admiral?" he queried. "Will the Navy build my submarine?"

Dashwood looked at Sir George Tracety, his eyebrows arched into question marks.

"I see no difficulty," declared the Director of Naval Construction.

"Very well, gentlemen," announced the Third Sea Lord. "I shall recommend to the Board of Admiralty that we build an atomic submarine of not more than a thousand tons, with the Rockingham system of propulsion, suitable for operating in inshore waters submerged—completely submerged—for an indefinite period."

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The professor could not conceal his delight when he heard this. "My dear Admiral," he cried, "this is indeed good news—a most gratifying conclusion to the years I have devoted to nuclear research."

"If this boat is successful, Rockingham, when she comes into service, the Navy—and, indeed, the British nation—will be greatly indebted to you," was the Third Sea Lord's sincere reply. Then he consulted his watch with the feeling of a day's work well done. "And now, gentlemen, if there are no more points—"

"If you please, Admiral," Rockingham interposed; "I have one. How soon will this submarine—my submarine—be ready?"

The admiral considered the matter. "Let me see. I should get it through the Treasury in three months," he said. "How about the construction side, Tracey?"

Sir George made a quick calculation on his memo. pad. "Ready for launching in fifteen months. Complete by June, the year after next," was his reply.

The Third Sea Lord accepted it. "There you are, Rockingham," he said. "There's your answer. And you shall be my guest at her launching."

The professor did not hide his pleasure at this invitation. "Thank you, thank you, indeed!" he exclaimed warmly. "It will be a wonderful day for me." He showed his delight by seizing Dashwood's hand and shaking it vigorously.

A few moments later the meeting broke up. Rockingham wrapped a muffler round his neck and struggled into his overcoat. Then he gathered his papers into his brief-case, said good-bye to the Third Sea Lord and walked out of the Admiralty, once more

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to grope his way through the fog up Whitehall and across Trafalgar Square.

As Sir George Tracey had estimated, the Rockingham submarine was launched from a famous Glasgow shipyard fifteen months after that meeting at the Admiralty. A huge crowd gathered at the head of the slipway to watch the ceremony. Plain-clothes detectives mingled with the spectators, keeping an unobtrusive watch for any suspicious characters among them. Sabotage was always a possibility; attempts by foreign agents to learn more about the new submarine than the Admiralty wished them to know were more likely.

The paint on the vessel's streamlined hull gleamed in the sun, and the flags at her bow and stern fluttered bravely in the breeze. Up on the launching platform that was banked with flowers and draped with bunting, stood a small group of distinguished guests of the builders and the Admiralty. Professor Rockingham, wearing his best suit for the occasion, was next to Admiral Dashwood, who wore uniform with sword and medals.

No one noticed an unshaven, red-faced little man in a dirty raincoat who edged his way furtively through the closely-packed spectators. They were too intent on the great event which was about to take place.

The wife of Britain's Prime Minister stepped forward to christen the submarine. In a sudden hushed silence she smashed the traditional bottle of wine across the vessel's bows. "I name this submarine *Magician*," she cried. "Good luck to all who sail in her!"

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A roar of cheering from Clydeside throats greeted this revelation of the new submarine's name. Then once again there was a hush as the lady cut the launching cord with silver scissors. For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then, very slowly, the *Magician* began to glide down the slip. The movement was the signal for renewed cheering, while the band stationed behind the launching platform played *Heart of Oak*. Out on the broad expanse of the river, tugs waiting to take the submarine in tow added to the noise with their whistles.

Faster and faster went the *Magician* down the launching ways until her stern reached the river. A moment later she was afloat, gently undulating in the slight swell.

Rockingham turned and, with a happy smile, clasped the Third Sea Lord's hand. . . .

The little red-faced man in the dirty mackintosh slipped away from the crowd of spectators and made his way to a telephone kiosk. He glanced quickly around, as if to see whether he was observed, then he lifted the receiver and asked for a London number.

When the long-distance call came through, his message was brief and to the point: "She went in at three-fifteen."

The voice at the other end expressed satisfaction.
"What now?"

For nearly a minute the red-faced man listened intently to the instructions that were given to him. Then, with a curt acknowledgment, he rang off and made for the railway station.

CHAPTER TWO

The Squire of St. Mawgen

MULLION HALL, on the north coast of Cornwall, had been the country seat of the Horncross family for many centuries. It was built back in the days of James I by Sir Willoughby Horncross, the first baronet, when he decided it was time he retired from his swashbuckling career. As a sea captain under Sir Walter Raleigh he had become a rich man with more than enough to live on until the end of his life.

An imposing house of red brick, with tall twisted chimneys, Mullion Hall is about a mile from the little fishing village of St. Mawgen. Sir Willoughby was soon accepted as the squire of the village, and many grey, tombstones round the old weather-beaten Norman church record the names of successive generations of the Horncross family who have followed this tradition.

The present squire, Sir Ralph Horncross, was a man of forty. Tall, dignified and greying at the temples, he had the aquiline nose of his forefathers. Active on the local council and a churchwarden, he was popular among the simple fisher folk who lived in the village. They did not, however, favour his wife. To them

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Lady Sybil, who came from London, was an "outsider." Hard-featured, haughty and proud, she seldom spoke to the local people except to reprove them, never smiled, only scowled at them.

On the evening that *H.M.S. Magician* was launched, a sea breeze moaned through the trees on the hills above St. Mawgen. The sea thundered against the rocks at the foot of the high cliffs which stretched away on each side of the village, and there was rain in the clouds that scudded across the sky, hiding both moon and stars. From the outside Mullion Hall appeared dark and forbidding, no chink of light showing from its curtained windows; but inside, sitting around a blazing fire of logs, Sir Ralph and Lady Sybil were entertaining the vicar.

"We are so pleased to know that Lady Horncross will be opening our 'bring and buy' sale next month," the vicar was saying.

"My husband and I are very conscious of our duty to the village," answered Lady Sybil with a gracious nod.

"Ah yes, indeed. The Horncross family has always been an inspiration to the people of St. Mawgen."

Sir Ralph, his voice deep and resonant, commented: "In these unsettled times it is important that we should continue the tradition of my predecessors."

The vicar smiled. "Your ancestor, Sir Willoughby Horncross," he said, "may have been a pirate, but how can we blame him when St. Mawgen has benefitted so much from the fortune which he amassed on the Spanish Main."

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"I sometimes wish I'd lived in those days," laughed Sir Ralph. "In the twentieth century one has to abide by the law—make money by honest means, which isn't always easy."

The vicar made an expansive gesture with his hands. "And then give it away to those in need, as you do so readily, Sir Ralph," he said. "I'm thinking of your promise to meet half the cost of our new hall."

The squire of St. Mawgen looked down at his shoes and coughed. "You embarrass me," he murmured. "If you say things like that I shall regret my promise."

The vicar half rose from his chair. "Oh, Sir Ralph, surely you wouldn't—," he protested.

Lady Sybil interrupted him. "My husband is only joking, of course," she put in quickly.

The vicar sank back in evident relief. "Of course, of course," he agreed.

Sir Ralph walked over to a side table and lifted a valuable cut-glass tantalus. "A drink before you go?" he queried.

The vicar shook his head. "No, no, Sir Ralph. You must not tempt a life-long abstainer. But you are right to give me my cue; it is time I was on my way. . . ."

The squire touched the bell by the side of the fireplace, and a moment later the butler appeared in the doorway. His manner was correct, but there was something about his face which suggested that he had not always followed such a respectable calling. The vicar knew that this man had served a long term of imprisonment for housebreaking, and that Sir Ralph, always

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generous, had given him the chance to lead a new life.

"The vicar is leaving, Poston," said Sir Ralph.

"Very good, sir," responded the butler with that pompous, aloof tone affected by servants of quality.

Lady Sybil extended a frigid hand to her guest by way of saying good-bye. Her husband's handshake was warmer. Then, as the butler intoned, "This way, sir," the vicar followed him out towards the hall.

Poston remained at the door until the rear light of the vicar's bicycle had disappeared down the drive. Then he retired to the kitchen to settle himself into an easy chair before the fire. There would, he thought, be plenty of time to read the newspaper before he had to lay the table for dinner

But he had hardly put his feet up on the table before he was disturbed again by the sound of a bell. Scowling, he made his way once more to the front door.

When he opened it, he saw a pugnacious-looking individual in a shabby suit and a cloth cap.

"'Ere," demanded the visitor aggressively, as he deftly inserted his foot to prevent Poston shutting the door again, "where's Sir Ralph 'Orncross?"

Poston did not know the man, and he did not like the look of him. "I'm sorry, sir," he answered loftily, while he gave the visitor a withering look, "but Sir Ralph is not at home."

The stranger was not in the least put out by this. "Don't come that 'igh 'at stuff wiv me," he snorted. "This is Mullion 'all, ain't it? Sure it is, sure as me name's Sammy Adams. And Sir Ralph 'Orncross lives 'ere, don't 'e?" •

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Poston made a grimace of distaste and tried to push the door to. "Sir Ralph and Lady Horncross live here," he conceded, "but they are not at home to-night."

Sammy Adams refused to give way. "See 'ere, tosh," he declared, "that's as may be. But Sir Ralph owes yours truly two 'undred nicker. Sammy Adams, the old firm, mate, you'll see me at Newmarket any day o' the flat. An' I'm 'ere ter collect, *or else!*'"

Poston did not like the way the conversation was going. He must get rid of the visitor quickly. "You must be under some delusion, my good man," he said firmly. "Sir Ralph is a gentleman; and a gentleman never owes money to your sort. Be off with you before I call the police."

Before the bookmaker could reply, Poston stamped on the foot that the man had stuck in the door, making him withdraw it somewhat hastily—which allowed Poston to slam the door, and leave Sammy Adams outside shaking an angry fist, the while he nursed his wounded limb.

Poston watched through a window to one side of the door until the man had recovered enough to hobble away into the darkness. Then he went along to the sitting-room to report the incident. . . .

After the door had closed behind the vicar, Sir Ralph and his wife were free to express themselves in a way that their manner towards their guest would not have led one to expect.

"Of all the old hypocrites!" Lady Horncross sneered.

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Her husband gave a shrug to his broad shoulders. "I suppose the man means well," he murmured.

"Hmph!" snorted Lady Horncross. "So well that you've promised to shell out a thousand pounds for that wretched new hall of his. Just where d'you think you're going to get it from? We're already overdrawn at the bank to the tune of four thousand. I owe my dressmaker so much she refuses to make me any more clothes. . . ."

"And I owe my bookmaker a much larger sum," Horncross interrupted, but without showing concern.

His wife swung round on him. "You owe . . ." she began angrily.

Then, hearing the door open, she broke off. Glancing round, she saw that Poston had entered the room.

"Yes, Poston?" queried Horncross.

"There was a — am, person at the door, Sir Ralph," the butler observed.

Lady Sybil cut in impatiently: "Relax, Wiggs, relax. There's no one here. We're alone."

"Wiggs" Poston at once dropped the pompous accent appropriate to his role of butler at Mullion Hall, and became his natural self. "Okay, okay," he declared. "I gits tired of this posh act."

"You were saying, Wiggs?" prompted Horncross.

"A bloke was 'ere from the old firm of Sammy Adams, guv. Dunning you for two 'undred nicker."

"An inconvenient caller, eh, Wiggs?"

Lady Sybil was more forthright. "Who is Sammy Adams?" she demanded.

Her husband was not put out by her icy tone. "A turf accountant, my dear, as they are called in this

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polite age—otherwise a bookie. I am one of his bad debts. You sent him away, Wiggs? ”

“ Wiv a flea in ’is ear’ole, guv. But you ain’t seen the last of ’im. If I know ’is kind, ’e’ll ’ang about the village for yer, ’e will. I don’t like the cut of ’is jib.”

“ That would be inconvenient—not to put it more strongly, Wiggs. I trust the vicar didn’t see him.”

“ No, guv—leastways, not so far as—”

But Poston was not allowed to finish his sentence. Lady Sybil interrupted him with a curt, “ Never mind the vicar,” and demanded of her husband, “ What are you going to do about this man? That’s what matters.”

“ A council of war seems to be indicated,” Horn-cross answered, his lazy tone suggesting that he was much less concerned at the situation than his wife. Then his manner changed abruptly; now he was emphatic, purposeful. “ When we were married, Sybil, you thought I was a rich man—and so I should have been, but death duties took half the Horncross fortune when my father died. The rest was enough to keep this place going. But it hasn’t been half enough to provide you with holidays on the Italian Riviera, and clothes from Paris, and jewellery from Cartier—”

Lady Sybil’s eyes blazed with anger. “ What about *your* extravagances? Why, you must have gambled away the best part of a hundred thousand! ”

“ More like *two* hundred thousand, my dear.”

His wife was shocked into silence by this disclosure, whilst Poston could only gape at the size of his employer’s losses.

“ That,” Horncross resumed, “ was why I engaged

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the excellent Wiggs Poston five years ago."

Poston winked a heavy-lidded eye. An expert cracksmen, he frequently accompanied his master when he went to stay as a guest in other people's houses, and was then in the best possible position to steal their valuables, which he knew how to dispose of at a considerable profit.

"Well?" queried Lady Horncross.

"Why do you think Wiggs and I haven't pulled off a job for the last six months? We need the money, I assure you. At Wraxall Castle, Wiggs was unlucky: he was nabbed. Fortunately the evidence wasn't enough for the police to secure a conviction."

"Not guilty, the jury said, guv. But the perlice don't like it when you gets off, not when they've brought off a cop. They're laying for me now. If we drops another clanger, it's twenty years 'ard fer me—and no reduction for good be'aviour, neither."

Lady Sybil stamped her foot; the attitude of both men towards what she regarded as a serious situation, angered her. "What about that trust fund your brother left to pay for educating those nieces of yours?" she demanded. "That's worth milking."

Sir Ralph spread out his hands in a gesture of resignation. "I've already done that, my dear," he said. "A simple fraud and a safe one—though I've no idea how I'm going to pay next term's fees for Alison and Barbara. Why you insisted on sending them to that expensive place in Paris, I can't imagine."

"Anything's better than having two teen-age girls hanging about here," was Lady Sybil's answer. "What on earth made your brother nominate us as their

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guardians in his will, I've never been able to see."

Sir Ralph gave a cynical laugh. "A very good reason—he disliked us both intensely," he said. "But that's beside the point. The blunt truth, my dear Sybil, is that our long and profitable association as purloiners of other people's property—I'm sure you dislike the word thief as much as I do—is drawing to an end."

"Are you suggesting that I shall no longer be able to live in the style to which I'm accustomed?"

"Perhaps," was the dry reply.

"Then you can think again. I've no intention of living like a pauper."

Poston was inclined to the same view. "I like a good life, meself," he said.

Horncross answered: "We're all in this together—sink or swim. I'm not such a fool as you think, Sybil. I knew that this situation would arise sooner or later, and I'm as anxious to live in comfort as you are. But to do so I'm afraid that we shall have to leave this country for a sunnier climate—a small South American state, perhaps, where the authorities do not ask awkward questions about the source of one's income."

Lady Sybil's puzzled expression showed that her husband's idea was new to her. "What *are* you talking about, Ralph?" she snapped. "Where are you going to get the money for us to go abroad—enough money, that is, for us to live decently when we get there?"

"We've got away with a great deal over the past five years, my dear—chiefly because we've worked together and because I happen to have brains."

"Oh, don't talk so much about what we've *done*. What are we going to do *now*?"

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"I have a plan."

Lady Horncross leaped forward in her chair. "What sort of a plan?" she asked eagerly.

"One that will bring us in a million—"

Poston's eyes widened and he whistled with surprise.

"A million nicker! It ain't possible, guv."

Sir Ralph Horncross applied a fresh match to his cigar: "It's very simple . . ." he began.

* * *

Two days later the tug *Mary Rose* sailed from the Clyde for Plymouth by way of the Irish Sea. She was towing H.M.S. *Magician*; the recently launched nuclear submarine was to be brought round to a naval dockyard for completion.

The clouds had looked black and the weather threatening before the *Mary Rose* began her voyage. Her skipper had thought twice before giving the order to slip and proceed. But the weather forecast had seemed good enough, so the skipper made his decision and put to sea with an easy mind.

But when they reached the Irish Sea he wished he had trusted his intuition instead of the Air Ministry forecast. The wind soon rose to near gale force, and showed every sign of getting worse. Now that it was night, the tug was bobbing up and down like a cork upon the waves, and from her bridge the skipper could hardly see the *Magician*. Her low hull was constantly swept by the angry sea, and rain and spindrift obscured the squat shape of her conning-tower.

"How's her head now, helmsman?" the skipper shouted.

"Two-one-zero, sir!" was the reply.

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"Steer two-one-two," the skipper bawled above the shrieking wind.

"Two-one-two it is, sir."

Spray poured over the tug's forecastle as the gale lashed the waves to greater fury. Every joint of the *Mary Rose* creaked in protest at the buffeting she was getting.

A duffle-coated figure struggled up the ladder to the bridge. "Time you had a spell below, Skipper," said the newcomer.

"I'm not leaving this bridge until we're round the Scillies, Mr. Mate." The skipper screwed up his weary eyes as he stared through the driving rain. "I don't remember a nastier night in the Irish Sea these twenty years."

"Just our luck, Skipper, to run into this gale when we've a submarine in tow."

"Aye, and a brand new one at that, without a crew aboard."

They both looked back. The *Magician* was careering about like a mad thing. One moment she was poised on top of a huge wave, the next she was plummeting down in a sickening dive.

"Towing hawser's slack one minute, bar taut the next," yelled the mate. "It's a wonder the wire stands it."

"Wish I'd run for shelter before nightfall," observed the skipper grimly. "Now it's too late. So the wire's got to stand it, Mr. Mate."

"Let's hope it will, Skipper. But what if it doesn't? We'll never pass another in this sea."

"That we won't. But the wind's from the nor' east.

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She can't do worse than drift out into the Atlantic."

"Where aircraft will find her soon enough."

"Aye. The R.A.F. and the Navy between 'em."

From the wheelhouse the helmsman called: "Eight bells, sir. Relief taking the wheel. Course two-one-two."

But the tug's skipper never acknowledged the report. His words were silenced on his lips by a sudden noise like the crack of a gun, and immediately there was a cry from aft: "Tow's parted, sir! Tow's parted!"

The skipper swore an angry oath. Then: "Stop engines!" he bawled, and the telegraph clanged urgently. Another order followed: "Slip the wire, Mr. Mate! Slip it before it gets round our screw!"

The mate reacted quickly. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted instructions aft.

The skipper grasped the voice-pipe to the wireless room.

"Sparks," he yelled. "Radio the Admiralty: 'Urgent! Tow parted in heavy weather. Submarine *Magician* now adrift in position fifty-three degrees twenty-six minutes North. . . .'"

When dawn broke some hours later, the skipper of the *Mary Rose* anxiously scanned the grey expanse of water all around him through his glasses. The gale had died down to a fresh breeze, the sea was no longer angry. The first weak rays of sun in the east presaged a fine day.

But there was no sign of the lost tow . . . no sign of *H.M.S. Magician*. . . .

For a full week the *Mary Rose* remained at sea

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searching for her. Frigates from Plymouth and aircraft of Coastal Command joined her, but there was never a trace of the missing submarine. . . .

It is not surprising that Admiral Dashwood was a very worried man. At his desk in the Admiralty he read eagerly the reports of the search as they came in by signal. Surely, he thought, it was impossible for a submarine, of all vessels, to capsize and sink in a gale, however bad.

Professor Rockingham came to the Third Sea Lord's office every day in the hope of hearing that his brain-child had been found. But each time one look at the admiral's grave expression was enough to tell him the worst.

"Two years' work undone in a night," groaned the unhappy professor, when the admiral finally admitted that there could only be one explanation: the *Magician* must have sunk.

"I understand your feelings, Rockingham," Dashwood sympathized. "I share them. It's a complete mystery how she foundered. There's no question of her having been rammed by another ship; we should have heard if she had. Our one consolation is that the secret of your reactor is safe."

"Safe? Oh, yes. How could it be otherwise?"

"There's quite a few countries interested in your reactor, Rockingham. But that's of no consequence now. If we didn't know that the *Magician* had foundered, we might have suspected she'd been stolen. As it is—" the Third Sea Lord lowered his head on to his hands—"your secret's safe, Rockingham, on the bottom of the Irish Sea."

CHAPTER THREE

. . *Tiger and Snort's Ordeal*

MOST OF the population of Great Britain, with an appetite whetted by sensational newspaper stories, were asking themselves, and each other, what could possibly have happened to the Royal Navy's new nuclear-powered submarine. But some had other things, of more immediate importance to themselves, to think about. Amongst these were Midshipman Timothy George Ransome and Midshipman Geoffrey Kenton.

Known to their messmates as "Tiger" and "Snort" respectively, these two young men had an excuse for their lack of interest in the *Magician's* fate. They were preoccupied with an important step in their naval careers, an examination in seamanship. If they passed it they would be promoted to the giddy rank of acting sub-lieutenant, and wear a single gold stripe around each sleeve. If they failed. . . but they didn't like to think of that!

The fair-haired Tiger Ransome owed his nickname to his initials, T. G. R., and to his fierce energy on the rugger field. He lived at Deal, on the coast of Kent, where his father had settled on his retirement from

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the Navy soon after the Second World War, with the rank of post-captain.

Tiger had inherited his father's love for the Navy, so that it was only natural that he also should make the sea his career. Entering the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth at the age of sixteen, he had passed out two years later well up in his Term so far as work was concerned. His skill at games had been marked by possession of his 1st XV colours, and since he had gone to sea as a "snotty" he had played both cricket and rugby for his ship and sometimes for the Fleet.

His friend Snort Kenton, whose home was in Dover, was shorter in build and darker of hair, but he was no less firmly committed to a naval career. A leading light of the Sea Cadet Corps unit at Northport Grammar School, he had won a highly-prized cadetship for Dartmouth at the age of eighteen. Meeting Tiger in the training cruiser, the two young men had struck up a firm friendship. Their subsequent service in the gun-rooms of the cruiser *Monarch* and the aircraft-carrier *Hercules* had given them many an opportunity for adventure in various parts of the world.

Tiger was usually the leader, Snort his staunch supporter. Ransome, always keen to try anything, set the pace, even though the task was a hazardous one. But, no matter how great the risk, Kenton would be there at his friend's side; and on these occasions he sniffed and snorted like a grampus, a habit which explains his nickname.

Now the time had come for the seaman'ship exam. which marks the end of a midshipman's time in the Fleet. Immediately after breakfast Tiger and Snort

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had left their ship, *H.M.S. Watchful*; and a boat had carried them across Portsmouth Harbour to the cruiser *Norwich*, whose officer of the watch had sent them down to the gunroom to wait until they were summoned for their ordeal.

In the minutes which remained before they reported themselves to their Seamanship Board, they busied themselves with last-minute revision of what they were supposed to know. Tiger, with the *Seamanship Manual* in his hand, was questioning Snort on the International Rule of the Road for ships at sea.

"A sailing vessel on the starboard tack gives way to one on the port tack," Snort intoned slowly, trying hard to remember the exact phrase.

"No, Snort," said Tiger, "it's the other way round. Look" —he showed him the book—"a vessel on the port tack. . . ."

Snort looked and sighed. "All right, all right," he said, "I'm wrong again. I shall never pass this exam."

His friend tried to be encouraging. "Oh, nonsense, Snort! Other snotties—"

"—weren't examined by the captain of the *Norwich*," interjected Kenton, with a loud sniff. "He hates snotties on principle and would like to fail the lot. I don't know what my family will say if I fail," he added dejectedly.

Ransome shared his feelings. "My father will be awfully disappointed if I don't get a 'one' in seamanship."

Snort sniffed again. "Imagine having to remain a snotty for another four months," he grimaced. "The lowest form of life in the Navy."

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"Don't be such a pessimist, Snort," Tiger retorted. "If there's one thing I'm looking forward to, it's being promoted to acting sub. at last."

While they thus argued about their fate, the man who was to decide it, Captain Arthur Bradley, commanding H.M.S. *Norwich*, was assembling the examining board in his cabin. In addition to himself, there were two commanders, by name Stewart and Leonard, one of whom came from the naval barracks, the other from H.M.S. *Dolphin*, the submarine base.

From behind his desk Captain Bradley glowered at them both from beneath bushy eyebrows. He was always bad-tempered early in the morning, but on this occasion he felt more than usually so. The last thing he wanted to do was to spend the morning examining a pair of half-baked young midshipmen; he had better things to do—like going ashore and playing golf. All right, he'd make 'em jump!

After they had exchanged greetings, Commander Stewart, who knew Captain Bradley's reputation, volunteered a compliment. "We're very glad to be on board *your* ship, sir," he remarked.

"No doubt, no doubt," snapped Captain Bradley. "The finest cruiser in the Fleet."

"The *Norwich* is certainly an excellent example to midshipmen of how a ship should be run, sir," ventured Commander Leonard.

"Grrr!" growled Captain Arthur Bradley, clearing his throat with unnecessary vehemence. "The midshipman of to-day doesn't know the difference between a smart ship and a slack one. Now, when I was a snotty in the *Hannibal* . . ."

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"The *Hannibal*?" queried Commander Stewart, who had not been pleased by Captain Bradley's reaction to his first remark and rather fancied getting his own back. "Didn't she run aground in 'thirty-two, sir?"

Commander Leonard was quick to see what his brother officer was driving at. He, too, remembered that Captain Bradley had been in the *Hannibal* in 1932. "Of course, sir; I remember. I've always wondered how it happened," he said.

"I believe the officer of the watch . . ." Stewart continued with a wholly innocent air, fully aware that that officer's name had been Arthur Bradley.

The captain of the *Norwich*, his brow black as thunder, stopped his speculations. "We are not assembled here this morning, gentlemen," he declared brusquely, "to discuss the circumstances attending the loss of the *Hannibal*. We have other business to attend to."

"Oh, of course, sir," Leonard and Stewart agreed in unison.

"We are here to examine two young gentlemen from the *Watchful*," Captain Bradley continued. "An anti-submarine frigate, I believe."

"Yes, sir," confirmed Stewart.

"Well, what d'you know about 'em?"

"Oh, very fine ships, sir."

"Except that they can't catch submarines, sir," agreed Leonard.

The temperature of Captain Bradley's bloodstream rose another ten degrees. "These *midshipmen*, gentlemen. What d'you know about *them*?"

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"Oh, I'm sorry sir," said Stewart. "Kenton will make a very good officer."

Leonard added: "And I shall be surprised if Ransome isn't worth a 'one' in seamanship, sir."

Captain Bradley banged his fist down on his desk. "A *first*, Leonard!" he snorted. "A *first*! In my opinion no midshipman of to-day deserves a first-class certificate. Now in my day as a snotty. . . ."

"You got a first, of course, sir," Stewart interjected.

"Certainly not—a *second*, Commander Stewart. And if the officers who examined me in seamanship decided that I was only worth a second, I'm sure of one thing—that Kenton and Ransome don't deserve anything better."

"But is that quite fair, sir?" Leonard protested.

Captain Bradley drew himself up to his full height of six feet three inches. "Are you suggesting that I am prejudiced, Commander Leonard?" he said, his voice icy.

"No, of course not, sir," was the hasty reply.

"Very well, then." The temperature in the cabin cooled a little. "Stewart, you will examine them in rigging, and anchors and cables. You, Leonard, will take them in boatwork and damage control. I'll do the rest."

"Aye, aye, sir."

This settled, Captain Bradley rang for his Royal Marine orderly and told him to fetch Mr. Ransome and Mr. Kenton.

When the summons reached the *Norwich's* gun-room, Tiger remarked: "Well, this is it, Snort."

"I wish it was all over," was Snort's reply.

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"Oh, cheer up," responded Ransome. "The Skipper can't eat you."

But Kenton was not to be comforted. "I wouldn't be at all sure about that," he said.

Regretfully leaving their *Seamanship Manual* on a nearby table, they followed the orderly up to Captain Bradley's cabin. As they crossed the quarterdeck they glanced longingly at the scene around them, Portsmouth Harbour in the morning sunshine. Fancy having to spend such a day sitting for an exam! It was like going to the dentist, Snort thought—except that when the dentist had finished with you, everything was over and done with, whereas if he failed this exam. it would affect his whole career in the Service.

They filed into the captain's dining cabin where, for the best part of an hour, they were questioned by Stewart and Leonard. Both commanders treated them sympathetically and with understanding, remembering the ordeal of their own seamanship exams. They asked nothing but straightforward questions.

But the captain of the *Norwich* was a very different proposition. As Kenton cautiously sized him up, he felt that his worst fears were about to be realised. Captain Bradley's expression beneath his black eyebrows was enough to daunt anyone.

"What lights are shown by a vessel not under proper control?" he snapped before Snort was seated.

Fortunately Snort knew the answer. "Two red, sir—displayed vertically."

"How far apart?"

Snort hadn't expected that one. "Er—eight feet, sir," he hazarded.

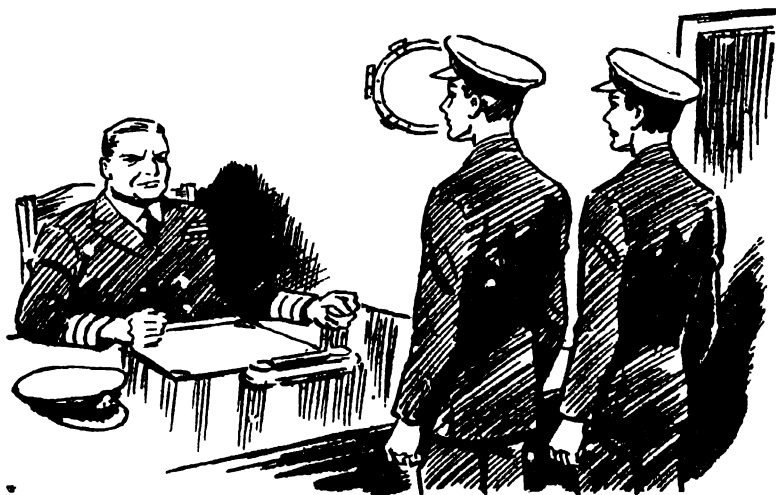
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At once Captain Bradley pounced. "No, six!" he snapped; and before Snort had had time to recover from this set-back, he was asked: "What would you clean with a red duster?"

Snort swallowed hard. "A *what*, sir?"

"A red duster, boy, a red duster!" bellowed Captain Bradley, whose face was beginning to look like one.



Snort looked round the captain's cabin. What on earth should he answer?

"So you don't know, eh?" prompted Captain Bradley.

"No, sir . . . that is . . . yes, sir. I mean I thought the Red Duster was . . . well . . . you wouldn't use it to clean anything, sir."

"Why not?"

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"It's the nickname for the Merchant Navy flag, the Red Ensign, sir."

"Grrr!" growled Captain Bradley. "Taken you the deuce of a time to tell me that, Mr. Kenton. You need to keep your wits about you more."

So Captain Bradley's inquisition went on. Snort suffered torture as he seemed to fluff question after question. Despite a feeling that he must have failed, the relief was overwhelming when, at last, he was dismissed.

Tiger fared no better. When his turn came, Captain Bradley fixed him with a beady stare and, amongst his early questions, demanded: "How many men in a cutter's crew, Mr. Ransome?"

That was easy. "Twelve, sir."

Any normal captain would have accepted this answer. But not Captain Bradley. "Steers itself, I suppose?" he rasped.

"Oh, I see what you mean, sir. Twelve oarsmen and a coxswain makes thirteen."

"Exactly!" Captain Bradley implied that the answer was obvious to anyone of the smallest intelligence. Then quickly he rapped out another question: "How many knees in a cutter?"

Knees? thought Tiger. What on earth was the captain talking about? His face wore a very puzzled expression as he stuttered: "*Knees, sir?*"

"Knees, Mr. Ransome, *knees!*"

Tiger hesitated, then began slowly: "Well, sir, if there are twelve men—I mean thirteen—they must have..."

This was enough for Captain Bradley to deliver a

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withering broadside. "Knees, Mr. Ransome," he observed pompously, "are pieces of wood for—"

Too late Tiger realised the correct reply. "Oh, I know, sir—" he began.

But Captain Bradley cut him short. "Pieces of wood for supporting the thwarts in a boat, Mr. Ransome, an answer which you should have known without being prompted by me."

There was much more in the same fashion, so that Tiger's relief when his ordeal was over was as great as his friend's.

The pair left H.M.S. *Norwich* as though they had been released from prison. But when they compared their experiences on the way back to their own ship, it seemed all too clear that the results of their examination by Captain Bradley could hardly be worse.

At least that was how they felt. But on board the *Norwich* Captain Bradley had yet to come to a decision.

"Well, Stewart," he asked, "what's *your* verdict?"

"I'd give Ransome ninety per cent. and Kenton eighty-eight. Well worth it, sir," was the reply.

Leonard said as promptly: "Ninety-two per cent. for Ransome and eighty-nine for Kenton, sir. Those are my markings. They know a lot more than I ever did."

"So you suggest that they both deserve first-class certificates, eh?" roared Captain Bradley. "In spite of what I said on the subject? I've no doubt you confined yourselves to asking them plain, straightforward questions." When the two commanders nodded, he went on: "Exactly; questions to which they can learn

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the answers parrot-fashion out of the *Seamanship Manual*. Anybody can do that. It's no test. Now, I asked them catch-questions, designed to see if they had their wits about them. That's what matters."

"But is that quite fair, sir?" interposed Commander Leonard.

Captain Bradley glowered at him. "Common sense is more important than book knowledge, gentlemen. And by that standard, I'm afraid—very much afraid—that Midshipmen Ransome and Kenton . . ."

Stewart knew what was coming. "Really, sir, I don't think we should be too hasty," he protested. "Both youngsters are excellent material; I've seldom come across better. Ransome's a first-class games player, a real leader. As for Kenton . . ."

Captain Bradley silenced this plea with a gesture. "Commander Stewart," he said with icy firmness, "I am president of this board. I have also been commanding men, in war and peace, for nearly twenty-five years. I should know better than you what are the qualities that go to make a successful officer."•

"Of course, sir," Leonard said. "But with due respect, we know these youngsters personally." He implied that this was more than Captain Bradley did, which was true. "We've watched them at work and play, we've observed them under all sorts of conditions . . ."

But this plea was to no avail. "Gentlemen," interrupted Captain Bradley, "this board is at an end. I shall promulgate the results in due course."

In the face of this dismissal there was nothing that the two commanders could do except retire from

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Captain Bradley's cabin. "It's really too much," said Leonard angrily, when they reached the quarterdeck. "He must be the most pig-headed blighter that ever served afloat."

"Let's hope he changes his mind when he simmers down a bit," Stewart said. "We didn't do much good by contradicting him."

"We had to do what we could for Ransome and Kenton," replied Leonard. "It isn't fair that they should suffer just because they happen to be examined by a martinet like Bradley. . . ."

By this time Tiger and Snort were back on board the *Watchful*, where even the seagulls shared their feeling of despondency, to judge by their cries.

"Still, we don't know the worst for certain yet," said Ransome, who was always an optimist.

"You may not, Tiger, but I do, so far as I'm concerned," sighed Kenton. "It's another four months as a snotty for me."

"I don't believe it, Snort. I don't believe anyone—not even Captain Bradley—would be so unfair. But if we have made a mess of the exam., well, there's nothing we can do about it now."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rescue at Sea

A COUPLE of hours later, Lieutenant-Commander Roger Lawson, R.N., commanding H.M. Frigate *Watchful*, stood in his cabin looking gloomily at the barograph mounted on the white enamelled bulkhead. He did not like the way it was behaving. The purple tracing had dropped very steeply since noon ; moreover, the sky outside was so overcast with black clouds that it was almost dark. There could, he thought, be very little doubt that a strong gale would very soon strike Portsmouth.

On some occasions Lawson did not mind bad weather, but to-day was not one of them, because the *Watchful* was duty frigate. If the Portsmouth Command required a ship at short notice for any urgent duty, such as a vessel in distress because of bad weather in the Channel, the *Watchful* would be ordered to sea.

Lawson's gloomy reflections were disturbed by a knock on his cabin door. When he called, " Come in," a signalman entered with a flimsy sheet of paper which he handed to his captain. It was as Lawson feared, and sooner than he had expected at that. "*Watchful* from C.-in-C.," he read. " Raise steam in all boilers with all

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dispatch. Report to my office forthwith."

With an inaudible curse at his luck, Lawson returned the signal to the messenger. "Right," he said, "show it to the Engineer Officer, and ask the First Lieutenant to get the motor-boat alongside for me right away."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The signalman went out and Lawson quickly changed into his best monkey-jacket. Then, gathering up his cap and gloves, he went out on deck. At the gangway he instructed his first lieutenant to prepare the ship for sea—and a rough sea at that—then walked down into the boat which carried him across to the dockyard and the offices of the commander-in-chief.

Half an hour later he knew that the *Watchful* was required to rescue a small yacht. An aircraft had sighted her to the south of the Needles. Her mast had gone and she was drifting helplessly towards a lee shore, with several people waving frantically from her cockpit.

Soon after four, with Portsmouth receding into the distance astern and his ship steaming into the teeth of the gathering storm, Lawson stood on the bridge, thinking with scorn of amateur yachtsmen who tried to cross the Channel in such weather; but he said nothing of this to those who were with him, the *Watchful's* navigator and Midshipman Tiger Ransome.

"Port ten. Steady. Steer one-two-seven degrees," he ordered into the voice-pipe above the roar of the wind. Then he turned to Tiger: "Your first dog-watch, Ransome? Right, take over."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Tiger, stepping forward. "Course one-two-seven."

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"See if she'll stand twenty-five knots," Lawson added.

"Twenty-five knots, sir," Tiger acknowledged, and passed the order into the voice-pipe: "Two-nine-zero revolutions."

Bells clanged below in the wheelhouse and the ship vibrated as the turbines increased speed. The Portsmouth shore was now no longer visible, but Tiger could just make out the coast of the Isle of Wight to starboard as the *Watchful* steamed past the Nab Tower.

A moment later, pitching heavily, the ship threw a big sea over her forecandle, then bumped badly down on to the next.

"Hmph, this isn't going to be a pleasure trip, Number One," Lawson observed to his first lieutenant who had come on to the bridge to report all secure. Both officers had to stand with their feet wide apart to steady themselves against the frigate's motion. "The *Watchful* didn't like that one, and we're only just clear of Spithead. Come down to twenty knots, Ransome."

"Twenty knots, sir," answered Tiger, as another wave broke over the forecandle. "Two-two-five revolutions," he ordered into the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

For the next two hours the *Watchful* fought her way through the heaving sea, through waves which, though not on the scale met in the Atlantic, were as big as any encountered in the Channel. As the storm grew in violence Lawson had to reduce speed more than once but at last the frigate reached the reported position of the distressed yacht, and it was time for all eyes to search the surrounding gloom for any sign of her and her crew.

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Fortunately they did not have to look for long. Kenton, who had come on to the bridge for the last dog-watch, saw her first. "There she is, sir!" he cried suddenly, pointing to leeward. The blurred silhouette of a small yacht was just visible. She was nearly waterlogged, and it was obvious that she could not remain afloat much longer. Her crew, as they clutched the rail of her cabin, waved frantically for help. No doubt they were shouting, too, but their cries could not be heard above the howling of the wind.

Lawson stopped engines, checked the frigate's way by going astern for a moment, and brought her as close as he dared to the yacht.

As the captain finished this manoeuvre, Tiger, who had been watching the yacht through glasses, said, "I think there are three women on board, sir."

"Women! I hadn't expected that," commented Lawson. They were, indeed, an additional worry for him. It seemed clear from the yacht's condition that a tow was out of the question, and it was surely only a matter of minutes before she sank. He said as much to his first lieutenant, and added, "We can't send a boat to her in this weather, either, Number One—but we've got to rescue her crew somehow."

But how? Snort proposed discharging oil which would calm the sea so that the waves would no longer break so dangerously.

"It's an idea," Lawson conceded, "but I'm afraid the seas would still be too big for our whaler."

"How about steaming to leeward and telling them to jump and swim across to us, sir?" suggested the first lieutenant.

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"We could, Number One—if we knew they could all swim. But it's too risky with women. They're our real trouble in this weather."

"I know what, sir," Tiger burst out. "We could send one of our life-saving rafts across on a line—and haul it back as soon as they've all jumped into it—couldn't we?" He looked at the faces of the other officers on the bridge to see their reactions to his idea.

There was warmth in the first lieutenant's answer. "I believe Ransome's got something there, sir. It's worth trying, anyway."

Lawson shook his head. "Yes," he said, "except that I don't think they'd jump—not those women."

"Well then, we could send somebody across in the raft to help them, sir." The speaker was Kenton. "I'd volunteer," he added.

"We might do that," the captain agreed slowly, then paused before making up his mind. A moment later he had come to a decision: "Yes. It's the only thing we can do. You're right, Kenton—and Ransome. But we'd need two chaps in the raft—two volunteers in case one gets into difficulties."

"I'll go with Kenton, sir," cried Tiger immediately.

The first lieutenant said. "There's your two volunteers, sir!"

"Are you both strong swimmers?" queried Lawson.

Tiger and Snort nodded their heads vigorously.

"Right. Carry on. Away you go. It's plucky of you, and I shan't forget who thought up the idea."

Quickly the two midshipmen dropped down the bridge ladder in the wake of the first lieutenant. They had time to don lifebelts while the raft was being got

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ready. It was tricky work launching it safely with so much motion on the ship. Tiger and Snort had the more difficult job of lowering themselves over the side into it ; but they managed it safely.

" Good luck to them both ! " Lawson muttered under his breath, as from the bridge he watched the raft and its crew of two drift away from the frigate towards the yacht. Its progress through the heaving sea was very slow. At one time Lawson feared that the yacht would sink before the raft could reach it ; but at last, at long last, it was there and alongside.

At first the crew of the distressed vessel were understandably reluctant to trust themselves to such a craft, for it seemed so frail. But their hesitation did not last for long when the yacht suddenly gave a sickening lurch, and heeled over so far that it seemed she must capsize. Urged by Tiger and Snort to jump for their lives before it was too late, a middle-aged woman was persuaded to join them in the raft. Then two girls jumped and were hauled to safety. The only man in the yacht's crew came last, in accordance with the old tradition of the sea.

" By Jiminy ! " cried Lawson to his first lieutenant as they watched the rescue from the *Watchful's* bridge, " if those two snotties pull it off, I'll—I'll go aboard the *Norwich* myself and see her skipper—tell him he must give Ransome and Kenton first-class certificates ! "

" By Jove, yes, sir," was the reply. " You couldn't want better proof than this that they're first-class seamen."

As the laden raft was hauled back to the frigate by the willing hands of her crew, the first lieutenant



Two girls jumped and were hauled to safety.

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dropped down from the bridge to take charge. Soon it was back alongside and the survivors were being helped up the scrambling nets. Not until all four were safely inboard did Tiger and Snort follow them. They were just in time to see the yacht give a heavy lurch to starboard before swinging back to port and rolling right over. A minute later she plunged to the bottom.

Thus fortunately rescued in the nick of time, the elderly couple were hurried off to the warmth of the captain's cabin. Another officer took the two girls down to his cabin to find them a change of clothing. Tiger and Snort went to their own quarters to change before they reported to Lawson on the bridge.

"Well done, you chaps!" the *Watchful's* captain cried, as he shook each by the hand. "Jolly good show. I'll make certain the right people hear about it."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Tiger and Snort, embarrassed at this praise. "D'you know the names of the people we rescued, sir?" Snort added.

"Yes, I do. Our ambassador in Paris and his wife, Lady Kershaw."

Tiger whistled. "Jiminy! Real V.I.P.s."

"The two girls are Barbara and Alison Horncross, cousins or nieces of the Kershaws," continued Lawson. "But I'll leave you to confirm that for yourselves. We're on our way back to Portsmouth; you can entertain the girls in the wardroom, while I look after Lord and Lady Kershaw."

"Aye, aye, sir," was the ready answer. The two snotties saluted and left the bridge for the officers' mess where they found their unexpected guests.

Alison was the elder by a year; nearly seventeen,

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with short dark hair and brown eyes that sparkled with life. Wearing one of Snort's sweaters and a pair of Tiger's trousers, she looked game for anything. If any adventure was afoot, she would surely be the leader.

Her sister, Barbara, was a blonde who looked charming even in the first lieutenant's old sweater, which was much too large for her. Together the girls were as nice a pair as one could wish to meet.

Nevertheless Tiger and Snort were shy and tongue-tied until Alison broke the ice.

"We want to thank you for the way you rescued us," she said.

Her sister added: "Yes, it was simply splendid of you both."

Tiger answered modestly: "We couldn't let you drown, could we?"

This was enough to start them exchanging names, and soon they were all talking together like old friends.

"It must have been an awful experience for you, in that yacht," said Snort.

"It was rather," Alison answered. "But it's all right now, especially being on board a destroyer like this."

"Anti-submarine frigate," Tiger corrected her.

"The Navy's very particular, Barbara," laughed her sister. She turned to Snort: "Is this what they call the gunroom?"

It was her turn to be corrected. "The *wardroom*," he grinned, "where we have dinner."

"Dinner," Alison responded eagerly. "Can we have dinner? We're absolutely famished, you know."

"Yes. We've had nothing except dry biscuits since yesterday," Barbara cried.

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"Then we'll remedy that right away," declared Tiger. He pressed a bell on the bulkhead and a white-coated steward appeared. Tiger ordered dinner as soon as it could be ready, and it was not very long before they were all enjoying plates of hot soup.

"What were you all doing on board that yacht?" Ransome asked. "Where were you going? And why were you at sea in such weather?"

Snort saw that neither girl could answer because their mouths were full. "Steady on, Tiger," he intervened. "Let 'em eat their dinner first: remember they're hungry."

So the inquisitive Ransome curbed his impatience for the next quarter of an hour, while little was heard except the click of knives and forks and occasional requests to "pass the salt, please." But eventually the girls declared that they had eaten enough.

"It's like a wonderful dream," Barbara said, as she pushed her empty plate away. "I shall wake up in a minute and find I'm still on board that ghastly yacht."

Alison nodded her head vigorously. "The best dinner I've ever eaten," she agreed.

"Oh, don't say that," Tiger cried. "Our messman's not used to compliments. You should see the sort of food he usually gives us—" He checked himself abruptly remembering that the girls could not be interested in the domestic troubles of the *Watchful's* wardroom. "But that's another story," he continued. "We want to hear yours—where you've come from, where you were going, and all that sort of thing."

"Well," Alison began, "we live in Paris; that is, we go to school there."

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"But you come to England for the holidays?"

"No, Snort. You see, we've no parents."

"I'm sorry," Kenton mumbled.

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," Alison comforted him. "Mummy died when we were very young, so we don't remember her. And Daddy was killed in the war."

"Then who looks after you?" Tiger asked.

"Well, Uncle Ralph and Aunt Sybil are our guardians."

"Sir Ralph and Lady Horncross," explained Barbara. "He's Daddy's brother. They live at St. Mawgen."

"But they think it would be dull for us to spend our holidays in Cornwall," continued Alison. "They're often away from Mullion Hall, where they live."

Barbara took up the tale. "So we spend our holidays with friends in France. This time it's Lord and Lady Kershaw: they asked us if we'd like to spend a couple of weeks with them in their yacht."

The two girls told the story of how the yacht had put out from Dieppe two days before. The storm had come upon them while they were sailing along the coast towards Brittany. They had had to run before the gale, which had brought them across the Channel towards the Isle of Wight. But before they could reach the shelter of the Solent, the mast had snapped; and before they could manage to start the engine, water had contaminated the fuel. Finally the yacht had sprung a leak, so that things had looked pretty hopeless for them. Fortunately an aircraft had spotted their distress signal and brought the *Watchful* to the scene.

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"And we shall tell everyone how you rescued us," Alison ended triumphantly.

"Oh, shucks," said Snort. "It was nothing."

A little later Tiger announced: "We shall be in Portsmouth in half an hour. What are you going to do when you land?"

"Oh, I expect we shall stay the night in an hotel with Lord and Lady Kershaw," replied Alison. "Then we shall return to Paris."

Barbara had a different idea. "Alison," she said suddenly, "this will be our first visit to England for five years. Now we're here, why don't we go and see Uncle Ralph and Aunt Sybil?"

"A trip to St. Mawgen, you mean?" Alison was enthusiastic about it. "That's a jolly good idea. Let's go and suggest it to Lady Kershaw. Come on."

So Tiger and Snort showed the girls the way to the captain's cabin. Leaving them there, they went out on deck and stood in the lee of the superstructure. The worst of the storm had passed by this time; the sky was almost clear and the wind had died down to a stiff breeze.

Kenton drew in a lungful of fresh air. "Pretty decent types those girls, eh, Tiger?" he remarked.

"You're right there, Snort," Ransome agreed.

"I'm not so sure about that uncle and aunt of theirs," Kenton mused. "They don't sound very nice people. After all, the girls are their responsibility."

Ransome agreed with him. "Yes it's pretty tough bundling them off to school in Paris and saying they can't have them at St. Mawgen for the holidays. Still," he added, "I suppose that's none of our business."

CHAPTER FIVE

Promotion for Two

UNLIKE the previous day, Thursday morning dawned bright and clear, revealing the *Watchful* at her berth alongside the North Slip Jetty in Portsmouth Harbour like a giant whale basking in the summer sun.

Wednesday evening's adventure, the rescue of the crew of the sinking yacht, had blotted out from the two midshipmen's minds all thoughts of their seamanship exam. When Snort awoke he had a confused notion in his head that something of importance to himself had happened, or was about to happen, but it was overshadowed by memories of the enjoyable evening which they had spent so unexpectedly entertaining Alison and Barbara Horncross in the frigate's wardroom.

Then he looked at his watch and saw that it was half-past seven—time to turn out. Throwing back the bed-clothes, he sat for a moment on the edge of his bunk, dangling his pyjama-clad legs. Only then did he remember the gruelling inquisition that he had suffered from the captain of the *Norwich*. That was the important thing that had happened yesterday, and to-day he and Tiger would hear that they had failed to pass their seamanship exam. At this thought,

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Kenton's youthful features puckered into a grimace of disgust.

Ransome was for the moment happier ; he was still asleep in the other bunk in the cabin which the two shared between them. But Kenton had to disturb his dreams ; because they sometimes found it difficult to get up in the morning, they had a pact that each would see that the other was up in time for breakfast. So now Snort snatched away his friend's bed-clothes and prodded him until he was awake.

While they shaved and dressed they talked together briefly about the yacht incident, but chiefly about their chances of surviving their recent exam. Neither of them, however, recalled their captain's remark : " I'll make certain the right people hear about it," nor had they attached the meaning to it which Lawson had in mind.

But just as they were on the point of leaving the cabin for breakfast with the other officers in the frigate's wardroom, there was a knock on the door, and the duty signalman came in.

" Captain sent this message last night, sir," he announced. " Said as you was to see it this morning."

He left a single sheet of flimsy paper in Ransome's hand.

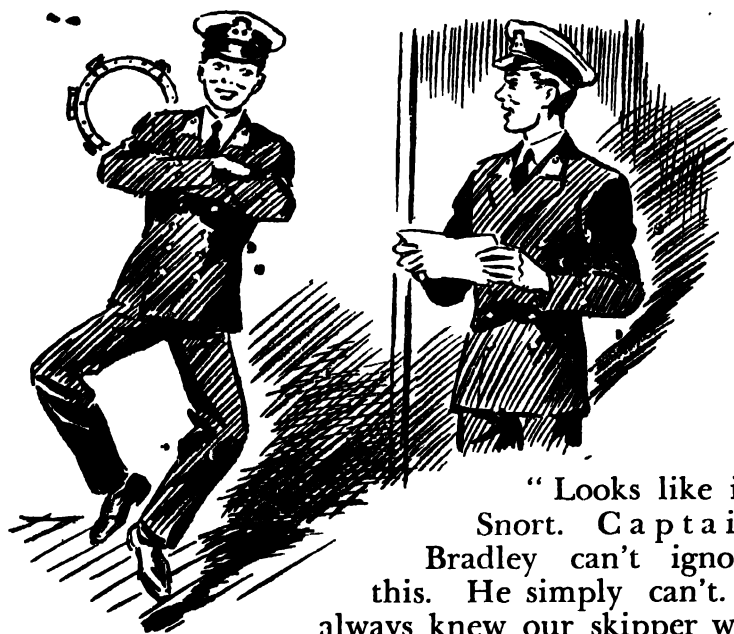
" Read it, Tiger," urged Snort.

Ransome unfolded the paper. "*Norwich* from *Watchful*," he began. " Request you delay issuing result of seamanship examination until I have had an opportunity of seeing you." Tiger paused; he had showed no special interest in the message at first, but now there was rising excitement in his voice. " Conduct

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of Midshipmen Ransome and Kenton to-night during rescue of British ambassador and other passengers from sinking yacht may have important bearing on your decision." Ransome finished his reading on a note of triumph.

Snort echoed his joy. "I say, Tiger," he cried, "d'you think there's a chance for us after all?"



"Looks like it, Snort. Captain Bradley can't ignore this. He simply can't. I always knew our skipper was a crackerjack. Why, I may even get a 'one' after all."

To show his joy, Kenton danced a jig round the cabin. "If I get a 'two'—" He gave a tremendous sniff—"Whoopie!"

"We're in luck, that's certain, Snort," Tiger crowed.

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"Why, next week, when we go on leave..." He was going to say, "We won't be snotties any longer; we'll be acting subs."

But he was not allowed to "count his chickens" in this way, because Kenton interrupted him. "Leave!" he cried. "Summer leave!" Then he broke into song: "This time, next week where shall I be? Not in this... Oh, I can't think of a rhyme."

Ransome laughed. "Don't be an ass, Snort," he said. "There isn't a rhyme for frigate, and it doesn't scan, anyway. Come on, I want my breakfast."

So saying, he led the way up the ladder and through the door in the screen which led to the ward-room. There, in the highest of spirits, they ate a large breakfast of bacon and eggs... three eggs apiece!

Afterwards, when they went on deck, the first lieutenant hailed them. "Ah, Ransome and Kenton..." he began.

The two snotties saluted their superior. "Yes, sir?"

"You've seen the signal the Captain sent last night to the *Norwich*?"

They nodded.

"Well, he's had a reply; Captain Bradley's agreed to see him at eleven o'clock."

The two midshipmen's interest in this news was obvious from their expressions, but they said nothing because the *Watchful's* Number One continued with: "I've just had a telephone call from Lord Kershaw at the Queen's Hotel, thanking us again for yesterday's rescue. And Miss Alison Horncross gave me a message for you two: asked me to thank you for saving them. It seems you made quite an impression on those girls

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while they were in the wardroom afterwards, because she asked me to tell you that they were going down to Cornwall to-day. . . ."

"To their guardians, yes, 'sir," agreed Ransome. "We expected that."

An amused twinkle in his brown eyes, the first lieutenant went on: "She also asked me to say that if by any chance either of you should happen to be near St. Mawgen during your leave, she and Barbara hoped you'd call at Mullion Hall."

Snort sniffed. "It's decent of them, of course," he said, "but there's not much chance when we both live in Kent."

Still, it was a nice thought, Tiger and Snort were agreed on that. It was certainly something for them to think about while they waited expectantly for the news—the good news—they hoped Lieutenant-Commander Lawson would bring when in due time he returned from his visit to the *Norwich*.

But despite this, and although they had work to do, that forenoon was a long one. The hours seemed to pass very, very slowly until at last, shortly before twelve, they saw their captain's black Humber Snipe draw up on the jetty abreast the frigate. Lawson jumped out and walked briskly over the gangway to the sound of the "pipe"—the long-drawn wail of a boatswain's whistle—to which he was entitled as captain of one of Her Majesty's ships.

"Thank you, Number One," he said as he stepped inboard and returned the salute of his second-in-command. Then, seeing the waiting midshipmen, he turned to them.

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"I won't keep you on tenterhooks," he told them. "When Captain Bradley heard what you did last night he agreed it was proof that you were good seamen. He said that, in view of the marks you gained in your exam., he had no doubt that you fully deserved . . ."

Lawson hesitated, an amused smile playing around his lips.

Tiger and Snort found the suspense almost unbearable. "Yes, sir?" they queried eagerly.

"You deserved first-class certificates, both of you."

Snort looked dazed; he could hardly believe his ears. "Even for me, sir?" he questioned.

"Yes, for both of you, Kenton."

"Well, I'm—!"

"No, you're not, Snort; you've earned it," Ransome told his friend heartily.

The frigate's Number One intervened. "It's certainly good news, sir. It's one up to the *Watchful*."

"It is indeed, Number One." Lawson turned back to the midshipmen. "I congratulate you both."

Ransome, his eyes shining with pleasure, said: "My father will be frightfully bucked to hear it, sir."

"So will my family," agreed Kenton.

"I suppose you'll want to telegraph the good tidings to your parents," Lawson said.

"As soon as possible, sir."

"Well, don't be in too much of a hurry, because here's another piece of news for you. You needn't wait until next week to start your leave. You can go tomorrow. Both of you."

"To-morrow!" cried Snort. "Can we really?"

"You can."

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The first lieutenant offered an explanation: "I take it the *Watchful's* going to boiler clean, sir?"

"She is, Number One," Lawson answered. "So we shan't have any work for these snotties to do." He frowned. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen, I should say sub-lieutenants."

"*Sub-lieutenants!*" echoed Ransome and Kenton together.

"Acting, of course," Lawson reminded them. "Otherwise correct. You can ship the stripes on your uniform as soon as you like."

"How absolutely wizard!" was all that Snort could find to say.

It was left to Tiger to add: "Can we go now, sir?"

"Of course." The captain of the *Watchful* watched them hurry away, then he turned to his second-in-command. "What it is to be young, Number One," he sighed. "I remember the day I shipped my first stripe. What a joy it was not to be a mere snotty any longer!"

"So do I, sir."

"But now—" again Lawson sighed before he continued, "when Ransome and Kenton are as old as I am, Number One, they'll wish they were snotties again. Life's like that."

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Three days later, in his home in Deal, Captain Ransome looked up from behind *The Times* as his son entered the room for breakfast. And as he put the paper down on the table he for once omitted to rebuke Tiger for being late. Moreover, when Mrs. Ransome came in with a steaming plate of sausages, her husband waved them aside and guided Tiger to the window.

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"Look, my boy," he said gruffly, pointing with his finger. "D'you think your roadmanship is as good as your seamanship?"

Outside in the short drive in front of the house, was a glossy new sports car—a sleek Austin Healey. Its long, low-slung body was painted a brilliant red.

Tiger scarcely knew what to say; it was unbelievable. "D'you mean—it's *mine*, Father?" he asked.

Captain Ransome stroked his beard. "Certainly," he answered "My son doesn't get a 'one' in seamanship every day, you know—and you have passed your driving test, haven't you?"

"Of course, Father; I've got a licence, too."

Then Tiger's young sister, Joan, burst in. "Come on, Tiger," she cried, "let's have a look at it."

Breakfast forgotten, they all went outside to admire the handsome present which Tiger's parents had given him. His hands itched to try her out on the road. Spurred on by his sister, he soon opened the door and settled himself in the driving seat.

Joan clambered in beside her brother. "Show me what she can do, Tiger," she urged.

Ransome grinned, switched on the ignition, and pressed the starter. The engine responded immediately, breaking into a gentle purr. Ransome released the hand-brake, then pressed his left foot firmly on the clutch. A moment later, his new car, the most wonderful and unexpected present he could have hoped to receive, was moving out into the road.

Captain Ransome, standing at the garden gate with his wife, watched their two children drive away. "The lad's done well," he said.

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"He's a son to be proud of," Mrs. Ransome agreed, but added a mother's reservation: "I do hope he drives carefully."

For the moment she need not have worried; the new car had to be run in. Once the quiet streets of Deal were left behind, Tiger put it through its paces, up to a speed of forty miles an hour. Even this proved most satisfying. He and Joan spent the best part of an hour touring the country roads around Deal before Tiger declared that it was really time that they went back for breakfast. And when they reached home again they found that Mrs. Ransome, indulgent towards her children as all good mothers are, had kept their sausages and coffee hot for them.

As soon as Tiger had wolfed these down, he remembered Snort. Rushing into the hall, he picked up the phone and asked for a Dover number. Soon he heard his friend's familiar voice at the other end of the line, and he told him all about the car.

Kenton was delighted to hear of his friend's good fortune. "You'll be able to drive all over England in her," he said. "You are a lucky blighter, Tiger."

"Don't worry. You're coming with me, Snort—if you want to, that is."

"Can I really?"

"Of course."

"Then I've an idea. Why don't we both go for a tour somewhere?"

"That sounds a wizard idea, Snort. Let's start at once—no, not to-day, to-morrow—and take a suitcase each—enough for a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks! Wizzo! I'll have to ask

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Mother, but I expect she'll be glad to get rid of me. Where shall we go? "

"The West Country?" Tiger suggested.

"Devon and Cornwall, you mean?"

"Yep, Snort."

"Okay. I'll be ready directly after breakfast tomorrow."

"Good show, Snort."

By way of an afterthought Kenton added, "Oh, thanks awfully for asking me, Tiger."

"Thank my father for giving me the car," was Ransome's rejoinder before he said good-bye and rang off.

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Early next morning Tiger slid into the driving seat of his car, pressed the starter, and turned towards Dover. When Kenton saw the Austin Healey he marvelled at its clean lines and impressive appearance; then he flung his suitcase into the boot and climbed in beside his friend—and they were away.

They passed to the south of London, then took the road to Salisbury, and after a couple of hours Ransome stopped and invited Kenton to take a turn at the wheel.

Snort was delighted to change places. "I can hardly wait until she's done five hundred miles," he said as he revved the car up to forty.

Tiger laughed. "By Jove, yes," he cried. "When she's run in, we really will step on the gas. She'll do more than ninety."

Perhaps it was fortunate that Mrs. Ransome could not hear this conversation. With their speed limited,

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it was nearly six o'clock by the time the boys reached Truro. There Ransome suggested stopping at an hotel for the night, but Kenton was all for going on to the coast. So on they went, until they needed the powerful beams of their headlamps to pierce the gathering dusk.

After a while Ransome remarked: "We've done over three hundred miles. Not bad for our first day."

"You're right, Tiger. Not at all bad. We've certainly earned our dinner."

"Yep, it's nearly eight o'clock. I'm famished. The only thing is, I'm not sure where we'll find a place for a meal, let alone a bed for the night."

"Why not?" demanded Kenton, who was now at the wheel.

Ransome shrugged his shoulders in the darkness. "Because I think we're lost," he said simply.

"Lost!" sniffed Snort, "when you've got a map."

"It's been too dark to see it properly for the last half-hour," Ransome admitted.

"You're a fine navigator, Tiger, I must say."

"Well, I think we should have turned to the left about ten miles back."

"All right, let's go back."

Snort was turning the car when its headlights picked out a signpost ahead.

They were fortunate. "It's all right, Snort," Ransome cried. "I know where we are now. This turning leads to St. Mawgen, and it's only five miles away."

"Right, on we go," Kenton decided, "for dinner and a bed at St. Mawgen."

A moment later, as the car gathered speed, he

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murmured, "St. Mawgen, is that the name of the place, Tiger?"

"Yes, why?"

"I seem to have heard of it before somewhere—recently, I mean."

Tiger laughed. "Of course you have, you dunder-head, so have I."

"Well, where?"

"You don't mean to say you've forgotten already?"

"Would I be asking you if I . . . ?" Kenton sniffed aggressively.

"All right, keep your hair on," Ransome answered. "St. Mawgen is where those two girls, Alison and Barbara, went to stay"

"With Sir Ralph and Lady Horncross at Mullion Hall," cried Snort. "Of course; what a mutt I am."

"They asked us to come and see them if we were ever down this way," Ransome said. "Remember?"

"I do," answered Kenton. "We're in luck. We'll give them a ring to-night. No, it's too late. To-morrow after breakfast. Okay?"

"Okay, it is, Snort," agreed Ransome as the lights of St. Mawgen appeared ahead.

They drove into the little fishing village, stopping in front of the hotel. Climbing out of the car, they heard waves breaking on the beach, and they could smell the sea in the breeze which blew from the west.

After their long drive they more than enjoyed their dinner, but they were also feeling tired, so that they went up to their room very soon afterwards. And before the clock in the old church tower struck half-past ten, both were in a sound and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

The Viper Shows his Hand

ADMIRAL SIR HUMPHREY DASHWOOD prided himself on his neat, business-like habits. As Third Sea Lord, he had so much work to get through that it was only possible to do it by exercising the strictest self-discipline. Just as he allowed himself four minutes and no more for shaving and ten minutes for the journey from his flat to the Admiralty, so he divided up his working day with the same precision.

His first task of a morning was to read all the telegrams that had come in from naval commands all over the world during the night. His secretary always had them ready for him on his desk when he arrived. There should be nothing else there for him to look at, because he devoted the rest of the morning to interviewing senior members of the Admiralty departments which came under his supervision and discussing their problems with them. He did not deal with papers which required his comments or approval until after he had lunched at his club.

For this reason he was considerably annoyed when he marched briskly into his office ten days after the loss of the *Magician*, to see a large parcel on his desk

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With a feeling of irritation he immediately rang for his secretary.

"What on earth's that thing doing there?" he demanded, indicating the parcel.

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir," was the answer, "but it arrived by the first post this morning, marked 'Urgent.' And it's addressed to you and marked 'Strictly Personal,' so I thought you should see it at once."

"Very well. Since it's there, open it."

Hurriedly the secretary seized a desk knife, cut the string and stripped the parcel of its wrappings.

When Admiral Dashwood's astonished eyes saw the contents, he all but snatched the enclosed letter from his secretary, so great was his anxiety to read it.

"All right," he snapped, "you can leave this to me."

The secretary was only too glad to go whilst the admiral was in such a prickly mood. He left a startled Dashwood staring open-mouthed at an object which he had recognised as a plutonium "gun"—one which the admiral knew had been specially designed for one purpose only. It belonged—or had belonged—to the nuclear reactor that Professor Rockingham had developed for H.M.S. *Magician*.

With trembling hands Dashwood tore open the envelope to extract the letter which was enclosed in the parcel. It took him a few minutes to read it and to understand its contents. Then he seized the telephone. His first call was to Scotland Yard; his second summoned Professor Rockingham.

The scientist arrived in less than half an hour. "Good morning, Admiral," he began, as he hurried

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into the Third Sea Lord's office. Then he saw the plutonium gun on the admiral's desk, and he stopped, his eyes wide with astonishment. "You have found the *Magician*," he cried. "But this is wonderful! Tell me where, Admiral, tell me where. I must know at once."

Dashwood's reply was in sharp contrast to the professor's delight. "I wish we had found her, Rockingham," he said.

"But if you haven't found her, Admiral, how could that plutonium gun be on your desk? There's only one. I had it made for my reactor. I designed it myself."

"I appreciate your bewilderment," Dashwood said. "And I'll tell you as much as I know. It sounds fantastic, but this parcel is the evidence to prove it."

Rockingham sat down with an air of resignation. "Go on, Admiral," he urged. "Go on, please."

"I received this gun of yours in a parcel which was delivered to the Admiralty by the first post this morning. There was a letter with it. Let me read it to you—the part that matters: 'You will be interested to learn that H.M. Submarine *Magician* was not sunk, neither did she part her tow: one of my men was on board her and cut it.'"

"Nonsense!" interjected the professor impatiently. "Impossible! One of whose men?"

The Third Sea Lord ignored the interruption. "The letter goes on to say: 'The *Magician* now lies safe in harbour. I am willing to return her to the Admiralty on receipt of one million pounds in gold, within two weeks of your receipt of this letter. Otherwise she will be sold to another interested country.'"

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Rockingham looked at Dashwood to see whether there might be a twinkle of mischief in his eyes; sailors, he knew, were prone to joke at other people's expense. "Are you—er—pulling my leg, Admiral?" he queried.

Dashwood shook his head. "I was never more serious in my life. Here's the proof—this gun—that the writer of this letter is speaking the truth."

"Then I don't know what to say," Rockingham confessed. "Indeed I don't." Hopefully he added: "Who signed the letter?"

"Someone who calls himself 'The Viper.'"

"*The Viper!*" Rockingham banged his fist on the table with considerable violence. "'The Traitor' would be a better name for the blackguard—threatening to sell the *Magician* to another country!"

"The Government will not be pleased if they have to pay a million pounds to prevent it. Fortunately we've a fortnight to find some other solution."

"You think you can discover where she's hidden?"

Dashwood's expression hardened. "We're going to take every possible step to find your submarine. We'll offer a substantial reward for useful information as to her whereabouts. I've already put Scotland Yard on the job. Now I'm going to ring M.I.5."

"You're right, Admiral," Rockingham approved. "You must find her. Why, if another country should obtain the secret of my reactor. . . ."

"That," answered the Third Sea Lord emphatically, "is something which cannot be allowed to happen. The consequences for this country would be far too serious. . . ."

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That same day—which was the day after Ransome and Kenton had arrived at St. Mawgen—four people were at lunch in Mullion Hall. Sir Ralph Horncross sat at the head of the table. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he was devoting little attention to the cheerful chatter of his two nieces, who were paying him such an unexpected visit. The fourth person present was Lady Sybil, and the expression on her severe features showed that, to her at least, Alison and Barbara's visit was far from welcome.

When Poston offered her coffee, she waved it away irritably.

The butler went to the other end of the table.

"Brandy, Sir Ralph?"

"Not to-day, Poston," was the disinterested reply.

"Very good, sir." Poston cleared his throat pompously. "Will that be all, sir?"

"For the moment, Poston."

When the butler had left the room, Alison giggled. "I say, Aunt Sybil," she said, "isn't Poston an absolute scream? He's such a pompous ass! Will that be all, sir?" She imitated Poston's haughty manner. "I'm sure he'd much rather say, 'Anyfink else I can get yer, cock?'"

Her aunt was not amused. "Nonsense, Alison," she snapped. "Poston would never speak like that. He's an excellent butler—and good servants are hard to find. I don't know where you get such silly ideas. That's certainly not what we sent you to Paris for."

Realising that she had gone too far, and that she had annoyed her guardian, Alison was ready to apologise. "I was only joking, Aunt Sybil."

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Lady Sybil pursed her lips. "It's not my idea of a joke," she said, then continued, "What are you two doing this afternoon?"

Barbara's smile returned. "Tiger and Snort have asked us to go for a drive," she said.

Seeing the blank expression on her aunt's face, Alison hastened to explain. "She means Timothy Ransome and Geoffrey Kenton — the 'two sub-lieutenants who rescued us from the Kershaw's yacht.'"

Barbara added: "They're staying in St. Mawgen. They arrived last night and telephoned this morning. We may go, mayn't we?"

Unexpectedly, since he had said nothing for so long, the girls' uncle supplied the answer. "An excellent idea," he declared. "Of course you may go."

Lady Sybil, judging by her expression, was not too sure that she agreed, but she did not dissent from her husband's decision. The girls were just thanking him when Poston returned to announce, in a supercilious voice, that a Sub-Lieutenant Ransome and a Sub-Lieutenant Kenton had called.

Alison immediately jumped up from the table, upsetting a salt cellar in the process. "It's Tiger and Snort!" she cried. "Come on, Barbara."

Poston raised an eyebrow. "The young gentlemen are friends of Miss Alison and Miss Barbara, I presume," he observed, as the girls hurried from the room, and he would have followed them himself if Sir Ralph Horncross had not called to him.

"Come back as soon as they're off the premises, Poston."

"Very good, sir."

The Viper Shows his Hand

Lady Sybil tapped her foot irritably on the floor. "What did those girls mean about Poston?" she demanded. "D'you think they suspect anything?"

Horncross lit a cigar before he replied to his wife's question. "Suspect Poston?" he said. "Of course not; they've only been here four days."

Lady Sybil was not satisfied. "Four' days too long," she rasped. "They're nothing but a bore and a nuisance."

"A bore, perhaps," her husband agreed, the corners of his lips lifting into a slight smile, "but they're far from being a nuisance. On the contrary, they're excellent cover for our present activities. This is just the time when people should think that we are doing our duty as their guardians."

"Then I hope these two boys will be here for quite a time—to take the girls off *our* hands as much as possible."

Then Poston returned with the news that the young people had gone.

"Thank goodness for that," was Lady Sybil's heartfelt comment.

Horncross cast off his languid manner. "And you and I have work to do now, Wiggs," he said, rising to his feet and walking towards the door.

These words were a signal to the butler that he could, for a time, relax into his true character. "Okay, guv," he answered. "Be wiv yer in a couple of ticks—after I've changed me togs."

Before going out, Horncross had one more word to say to his wife. "If you'd like to come down to the cove, Sybil . . ."

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She shuddered. "That place! No, thank you."

"I thought you might like to see the—er—means by which we are about to gain a fortune that will put us in clover for the rest of our lives."

"I'll believe that when I see the money."

Horncross was annoyed at this indifference to his achievement. "If the Admiralty doesn't pay my price, there are many other nations who will—and gladly," he snapped. "We've a surety in the cove for a million pounds, and we're going to get it in gold."

"When?" demanded his wife cynically.

"I expect to hear at almost any time that it's to be ours—to-morrow, perhaps. They'll pay the Viper's price all right," he added.

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"Ransome and Kenton were certainly enjoying their holiday. With glorious weather, the sea and the Cornish countryside, a high-powered sports car, and Alison and Barbara as their lively companions—what more could a couple of healthy youngsters ask for?"

When they collected the girls at Mullion Hall that afternoon, they had not made up their minds where to go, nor could the girls offer them much help.

"We haven't been here long enough to know our way around," laughed Alison. "We're as much strangers here as you are."

After a brief discussion they decided that it would be best if they drove along the coast road and saw where it took them. Ransome's Healey, with all four of them aboard, purred through St. Mawgen, and in a matter of minutes they had left the little cluster of cottages behind.

The Viper Shows his Hand

Climbing the hill on the other side, they drove for a time along the summit of high cliffs against which the ocean swell could be heard pounding with rhythmic regularity. But after a while the road dipped into a valley and down into a bay where the beach looked so inviting that they agreed to stop for a while.

As they sat in the sun on the sandy beach, Barbara declared lazily: "I wish we came to St. Mawgen more often, Alison."

Her sister answered: "Me, too. I wonder if they'll invite us next year."

Barbara made a grimace. "I don't suppose so. Uncle Ralph might; but Aunt Sybil's only putting up with us because she has to."

When they all felt hungry enough for tea, they walked to the back of the beach near where they had left the car. There, in the cosy front room of a picturesque little cottage, neatly-laid tables confirmed the notice at the gate on which was posted: "Teas served here."

They ate scones spread with strawberry jam and cream, and more cakes than were good for them.

As they were driving back, Kenton reached for the dashboard and switched on the car's radio. The six o'clock news bulletin was just finishing and Snort, who had been hoping for music, was about to switch to another station when one item caught his attention.

"The Admiralty to-day issued an important statement . . ."

Kenton pricked up his ears at this. "I say, Tiger," he said, "we must listen to this."

His appeal was unnecessary. Ransome had the same

The Missing Submarine .

professional interest in what the announcer was saying.

"It is now believed that H.M.S. *Magician*, Britain's new nuclear submarine, reported missing on the twenty-fourth of last month, did not founder in the Irish Sea, as was previously believed. The Admiralty has accordingly decided to offer a reward of ten thousand pounds to any person who can provide such information as will lead to her recovery. Anyone who is able to assist the Admiralty in any way should communicate with the nearest police station or naval headquarters. That is the end of the Admiralty announcement."

"I say, that's interesting," Kenton commented as he switched off. "Where on earth can the *Magician* be hidden?"

"Ransome's face had assumed a puzzled frown. "It sounds most odd: I think the Admiralty must know more than they're ready to admit."

"Well, I didn't understand any of it," laughed Alison, "whatever it is you boys are so serious about; except for the reward, of course. I'd never say no to ten thousand pounds."

"Would anyone?" was Kenton's quick retort.

"Well, do explain what it's all about," said Barbara.

"Don't you girls read the newspapers?" Ransome, with all the authority of a recently promoted sub-lieutenant in Her Majesty's Navy, explained the advantages of a nuclear-powered submarine. It was a great step forward, and if a country unfriendly to Britain were to gain possession of the secret she would, in the event of war, be in a position to cut off our food

The Viper Shows his Hand

supplies, much of which must come from overseas, and so starve us into defeat. †

Barbara was impressed by Tiger's knowledge. "I'd never have thought it could mean so much," she said, when he had finished his explanation.

"Nor me," commented Alison gravely.

For the rest of the drive back to St. Mawgen the missing submarine was the chief topic of their conversation, and all four made many guesses as to where the vessel might be. . . .

The next morning Tiger and Snort talked about it again when they were breakfasting together in their hotel.

Ransome started it. "You know something, Snort," he said. "We might find the *Magician* somewhere around here."

Kenton paused in the act of conveying a piece of toast and marmalade to his mouth. "What on earth gave you that idea?" he enquired.

"All those inlets and caves in the cliffs we saw yesterday, along the coast to the west of St. Mawgen. One of them would be an ideal place to hide a submarine in."

Kenton munched his toast. "I suppose it's possible," he admitted slowly, "but I don't see why *we* should find her, except by pure chance."

"That's what I mean," Ransome answered. "I'm not suggesting we should actually search for her. I just thought we should keep our eyes open."

"There's certainly no harm in doing that," Kenton agreed, then hesitated—"except for one thing."

"What's that?"

The Missing Submarine

"You talked as if someone had hidden the *Magician*. That must mean that someone has *stolen* her. We don't know that."

"No. But it's possible—I'd say probable, in view of the size of the reward which the Admiralty has offered for information."

"As a matter of fact, I agree with you, Tiger," Kenton nodded. "That's why I made my reservation a moment ago. Anyone who'd steal a submarine must be an ugly customer. I wouldn't like to run into him, not to mention his gang. He'd have a gang. He couldn't do it alone, and they'd be tough customers. We can't run the risk of getting Alison and Barbara into trouble."

"You're right there, Snort," Ransome agreed.

"So if we do see anything of the *Magician* — by accident, I mean, we shall have to watch our step," concluded Kenton.

The conversation was interrupted at this point by Tiger catching sight of Alison and Barbara through the breakfast room window. The girls were coming towards the hotel.

"Gosh," he cried, jumping to his feet, "here they are already."

Kenton, who remembered, of course, that they had agreed the previous evening that they would spend the whole day out together, followed Ransome from the room. "I hope the sandwiches are ready," he said.

"You see to them while I get the car out," Ransome replied as he disappeared in the direction of the garage.

And so, for the time being, the *Magician* was for-

gotten ; and though they drove for miles along the coast and explored many coves and small bays, Ransome and Kenton saw nothing of the missing submarine that day.

That evening Tiger and Snort dined at Mullion Hall. Lady Sybil Horncross had accepted her husband's suggestion that they must extend their hospitality to their niece's two friends if they were not to seem uncivil, not to say rude—which could make the young people suspicious.

At the end of the meal, when Lady Sybil and the two girls had gone out of the room, leaving the men to take their coffee alone, Horncross entertained Tiger and Snort with fascinating stories from the history of Mullion Hall for nearly an hour.

When at last he paused to glance at his watch, he exclaimed : " Good gracious ! It's ten o'clock. What will the ladies think ? "

So they hurried into the sitting-room to join Lady Sybil and the girls.

" Sorry, my dear," Horncross apologized. " We were talking about this old place and quite forgot the time."

For once his wife smiled. " We are very attached to Mullion Hall," she said.

The talk then drifted into other channels. Ransome seized the chance to ask about something that had been puzzling him. At the end of the garden behind their hotel, he said, he had noticed a railway line, a single track in a cutting. Where did it go, he asked his host.

If Horncross hesitated a moment before he answered, neither of the young men noticed it.

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"Oh, that's a spur off the main line serving a jetty in Rackstone Cove," was Sir Ralph's reply. "It runs under Hangman's Hill, and was built before the war, but it hasn't been used for the last ten years. It's derelict now."

"That's what I imagined," remarked Ransome, and thought no more about it.

Soon it was time for them to go. Saying "goodbye and arranging to meet Alison and Barbara again, the two youngsters drove back to their hotel.

"A wonderful day, Snort," Ransome said as they climbed the stairs to their room.

"Certainly has been," Kenton yawned. "And a very good dinner. I must say I've changed my mind about the Horncrosses. I thought they were pretty heartless at first, not having Alison and Barbara home for their holidays, but I was wrong."

Ransome was vigorously cleaning his teeth. "I agree with you," he nodded. "They're having the girls to stay with them now, and they've been jolly decent to us."

Before they climbed into their beds, Ransome drew the curtains apart to open the window. There was enough light from a nearly full moon for him to see the single-track railway line, and the mouth of the tunnel through which it passed under Hangman's Hill to the jetty in Rackstone Cove.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ghost Train

RANSOME and Kenton, and, for that matter, Alison and Barbara—might be sleeping soundly, but Sir Ralph Horncross was not. When the little antique clock over the fireplace in his study pointed to two o'clock, he was still working at his desk. Everyone else at Mullion Hall had gone to bed long ago, with the exception of Poston. As the clock's chimes died away, the door of the study opened and the butler came in. He was wearing an old trench coat and mud-caked wellingtons.

"Good, Wiggs. You're on time," said Horncross, rising to his feet. "Let's have my things."

"Okay," Poston answered, offering his master a coat and boots similar to his own. As Horncross put them on, the butler asked in a hoarse whisper: "What's the lark, guv, going up on 'angman's 'ill at this time of night?"

Horncross's lips curled into a self-satisfied smile, but he did not provide the answer. "You'll learn soon enough, Wiggs," was all he said, before giving the curt instruction: "Switch off the lights and follow me."

Crossing to the door, Horncross flung it open, paused to see that Poston obeyed his order, then strode

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along the corridor to the west wing. Through the side door to the garden the pair went out silently into the darkness of the night.

As he closed the door behind him Poston shivered. A white mist had drifted in from the sea, festooning the trees which surrounded Mullion Hall with a clammy white shroud. Moisture dripped from the branches, and the air was chill.

"Lumme!" he whispered, "we ain't a-goin' fer a walk through this, are we?"

"Certainly," was the reply, "as far as the railway cutting."

Poston thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his waterproof. "Me corns'll never stand it," he groaned.

But he gained no sympathy. "Stow your trap!" was all Horncross said, leaving Poston no alternative if he wished to keep his job, but to follow his master.

For the best part of the next five minutes there was silence. But when they were clear of the grounds and walking down the road towards the village, the butler could no longer restrain his tongue.

"Guv," he whispered, tugging at Horncross's sleeve "Guv! Someone's following us."

"What!" Horncross stopped in his tracks. But, though they both strained their ears for the smallest sound, they could hear nothing—except for the chattering of Poston's teeth.

"Nothing," said Horncross after a moment. "There's nobody there."

Poston glanced nervously over his shoulder at the dim shadows of trees and bushes that lined the road.

The Ghost Train

"Yer can't 'ear nuffin'," he said, "because 'e stopped when we stopped."

Horncross's answer was a firm one. "I'm sure nobody's following us," he said. "And we haven't time to waste. Come on."

With this he resumed his long strides towards the village and Poston hurried after him. He was not going to be left behind—not on a night like this.

Once again he kept his mouth shut, until Horncross turned off the road, through a gap in the hedge, to take a short-cut to the railway cutting by a footpath that skirted Hangman's Hill.

Then, for the second time, Poston brought his employer to a halt with an urgent claim that he could hear the footsteps of someone following them.

He was sure of it. "'E's after us, guv," he stuttered, "and I don't like it; don't like it at all. 'E'll catch us if we don't 'urry. Let's get away from 'ere, quick." With this he seized his master by the arm in an attempt to make him run for it.

But Horncross shook himself free; he was not to be frightened into flight by the lively imagination of his accomplice. "Dont be a fool, Wiggs," he snapped. "We're not running. There's no need. There's no one there, I tell you. Listen!"

They did listen, both of them, once again; and once again there was not a sound to be heard.

"You see..." Horncross was beginning, when suddenly he was interrupted by a blood-curdling screech very close at hand.

At this disturbing interruption Poston would have run all by himself, as fast as his legs would carry him,

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all the way back to the security of Mullion Hall, if Horncross had not seized him by the shoulder and held him fast.

"Nothing but an owl," he explained. "An ordinary screech owl, Wiggs." He pointed at a pair of round yellow eyes peering down at them from an overhanging branch of an old oak tree. "Just a bird. You'll be telling me there's a ghost on Hangman's Hill next."

"Well, ain't there?" Poston was remembering the story which, on Horncross's instructions, he had spread through St. Mawgen. Black Jack, a blood-thirsty pirate of long ago, who had met his death by the hangman's noose on this hill, was supposed to haunt it still. And Silas Tuckett, the oldest inhabitant of the village, had eagerly supported the yarn. Why, he could remember the time when his grandfather had seen the ghost with his own eyes! The villagers might know that old Silas Tuckett was a bit wanting in the head, but they were superstitious folk: and though it did not seem sensible to believe the story, it *might* be true — so that none of them now ventured on to Hangman's Hill after dark. And Poston had told the story so often that he half believed it himself when he was out at night.

"Of course there's no ghost," was Horncross's answer. "If you're thinking of Black Jack, you know well enough why I got you to spread that yarn. I wanted to be sure nobody went near the railway spur in the middle of the night."

Poston was somewhat reassured. "I 'opes you're right, guv," he muttered, once more following his employer towards the cutting. Then a new idea struck

The Ghost Train

him. " Maybe it'll fix so as people don't see the train," he said, " but they'll 'ear' it, won't they? "

Wearily Horncross explained that the villagers would suppose it to be a train on the main line, which was not very far away. The shipyard had been derelict since the war, so that there was no reason why a train should run to it now.

Chiefly to allay Poston's fears, Horncross continued : " I don't say it's exactly pleasant out here myself, Wiggs, but the first train's running into the yard to-night ; half a dozen trucks of material. You know that."

" Yep, guv."

" Well, we've got to be sure they get through without a hitch."

As he was speaking, a locomotive whistle blew shrilly away in the distance. It gave a long blast, followed by a short, and then another long one.

" That's her, Wiggs! " Horncross cried. " That's our train ; she's leaving the main line now. Come on—or we shan't reach the cutting in time to see her go through."

So saying, he broke into a run, and Poston panted after him. . . .

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Perhaps it was because Tiger Ransome had heard the legend of Hangman's Hill earlier in the day, told in all its lurid detail by one of the villagers, that he was not sleeping well that night. Tossing and turning in his bed in the St. Mawgen hotel, he did battle with his pillow in the course of a frightening nightmare. Black Jack, cutlass in hand, was chasing him through a

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long tunnel and gaining on him all the time. Near to dropping with exhaustion, he must soon be caught and the direst death befall him. He could hear the pirate shouting bloodthirsty cries at him, screaming at him . . . except that when he looked round, so rash an act in the circumstances, but one which seemed to be forced upon him, it was not the hideous features of Black Jack that he saw, but Lady Sybil Horncross. And her screams and shrieks were growing more and more piercing until they reminded him of a locomotive whistle . . . until they sounded just like a locomotive whistle. Still in the tunnel, he was now being pursued by a train. . . .

Ransome awoke, first with a start of horror, then with a shudder of relief. But had it all been a dream? He could not really have heard a locomotive whistle. The railway that ran past the back of the hotel had been abandoned years ago ; Sir Ralph Horncross had said so : and yet, somehow. . . .

He sat up in bed. If it wasn't a whistle, if the line was derelict, what was that rumbling sound which he could hear approaching the hotel, a sound that was just like a train?

Throwing back his blankets, he jumped out of bed and darted to the window. And what he saw made him rub his eyes : it was so difficult to believe it.

Then he was at Kenton's bedside and shaking him vigorously.

"Snort!" he cried. "Wake up! Wake up!"

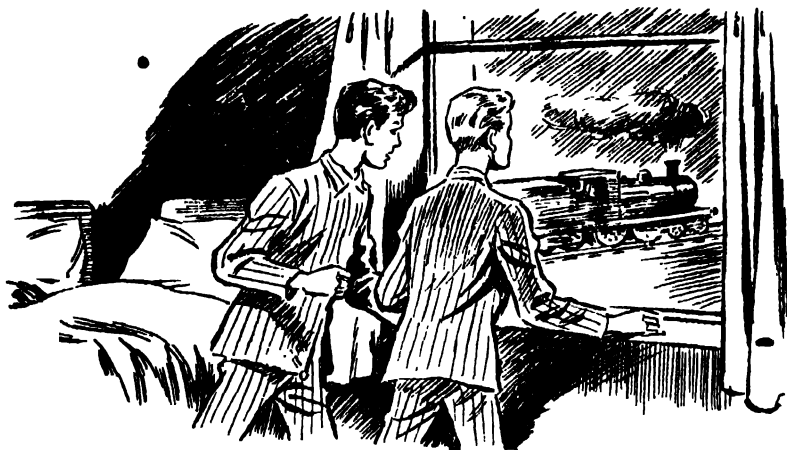
Kenton turned over. "What is it?" he groaned in sleepy protest.

Ransome pulled off his friend's bedclothes. "Come

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over to the window," he urged. "Quick." And when Kenton reached it and stood there with him, he added: "Look at that!"

It was Kenton's turn to rub his eyes with amaze-



ment. Coming down the spur, clearly visible in the misty moonlight, was a tank engine. There was no doubt about it. As it passed the back of the hotel, they both saw the driver and fireman silhouetted against the yellow flames of the furnace. And it was pulling six covered wagons; they counted them.

They watched the whole train enter the tunnel under Hangman's Hill, and waited in breathless silence until its sound had died away and nothing remained except a cloud of steam swirling back from the tunnel's mouth.

"Well," Kenton declared at last, "one thing's certain: that was no ghost, Tiger."

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"Of course it wasn't," Ransome answered. "So that line isn't a derelict one after all."

"No," Kenton agreed.

"Then why did Sir Ralph tell us that it was?"

Ransome, always of an enquiring mind, wanted to know the answer, but his less inquisitive friend was too sleepy to allow the problem to worry him. "Don't ask me, Tiger," he said, "not at this time of night." He looked at the luminous dial of his watch: it showed half-past two. "But there must be some quite simple solution."

"I suppose there must." But Ransome's voice echoed the doubt in his mind.

"Of course there is," responded Kenton, crawling back into his bed; "one which we'll find out in the morning." He yawned. "'Night, Tiger.... Good night."

And with that Ransome had to be content until the morning. But as soon as he had had his breakfast, he wanted to learn much more. "If anybody knows what a train was doing on that line last night," he said as he led Kenton down the stone-flagged passage to the office, "the manager of this hotel will."

The office was a little room off the hall. Dusty pads of bills and invoices were pinned to the wall, together with calendars and old sporting prints.

Carefully blotting an entry in his account-book, the manager greeted them with a ready smile. "I hope you're enjoying your stay here, gentlemen," he said.

"Certainly," Ransome replied. "No complaints at all. We just wanted to ask you something—out of curiosity, you know."

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The manager beamed affably at them. "Anything I can do, gentlemen. . . ."

"It's about the railway line that runs behind this hotel," Ransome continued.

"Ah, yes. The line that used to go through to Rackstone Cove. It's disused."

"That's the point," Kenton interjected. "It's not disused: we saw a train going into the tunnel last night."

The manager fiddled with his pencil. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken," he told them politely. "The last time a train ran down that line was in nineteen forty-five, at the end of the war."

Ransome answered: "The last time *you* saw a train, perhaps. But *we* saw one last night, both of us; and I heard it whistle, too, didn't you?"

The manager shook his head. "No," he declared, "I didn't. I'm afraid you must have dreamed it, gentlemen. You'll have heard talk in the village about the ghost on Hangman's Hill; this must have been a ghost train." He laughed as if he had made a joke, then shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, I don't believe such things myself. All the same I wouldn't advise anyone to enquire too closely into things that happen in these parts."

There was a warning note in the man's voice that suggested to Ransome that it would be useless to persist with questioning him. In fact, he decided, it might be as well to agree that they had dreamed the incident—so as not to excite suspicion if there were something odd about the train.

So he kicked Kenton on the shin to make him keep

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silence, and said apologetically: "We must have been mistaken. Sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all, not at all. Always at your service, gentlemen," was the manager's genial reply before he returned to his account-book.

Returning to the lounge to await the arrival of Alison and Barbara, Ransome remarked that if he alone had seen the train during the night, not Kenton as well, he might have been willing to agree that he had dreamed it. But because both had seen it, and because neither believed in ghosts, there could be no possible doubt that it had been real. And that required explanation.

They told Alison and Barbara about it as soon as the girls appeared at the hotel.

"The manager assured us that no train has used that line since the war ended," Ransome said.

"So he insisted that we hadn't seen one last night; he said we must have been dreaming," Kenton added.

"Well, I've an idea," Alison suggested. "We'll go and see old Silas Tucket. He knows everything about the village, and he ought to be able to explain it."

Setting off down the road, they soon reached Tuckett's cottage, a neat little straw-thatched place with honeysuckle climbing up the whitewashed walls. They found Silas Tuckett sitting in a chair by his front door enjoying the summer sunshine.

"Good morning, Mr. Tuckett," Alison greeted him cheerfully.

The old man took his pipe from his toothless jaws and grinned at them amiably. "'Marnin' to 'ee, miss," he chirped. "'Scuse me not gettin' up. Me back's

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that bad it'd take me 'alf an 'our to get in me chair agin! "

"Of course, Mr. Tuckett," Alison said soothingly. "We only want to ask you something — about Rackstone Cove."

The old man perked up. "Ah!" he said, "Lived there once, I did, nigh on twenty years ago, afore I retired and came to live 'ere."

Tiger took up the questioning. "Mr. Tuckett, there's a railway line that goes through a tunnel under Hangman's Hill."

"Aye, zur," old Silas nodded. "Built in 'fifteen or 'sixteen, maybe, to serve shipyard. But they close 'un in nineteen twenty or thereabouts."

"But it's been used since then, Mr. Tuckett?" prompted Kenton.

"It 'as that, zur. When t'other war begins, chaps from Admiralty comes down and says, wot a fine place for buildin' and repairin' ships. Small 'uns, o'course, the like o' trawlers and torpedo boats. Rackstone Cove were busy enough then. Up to 'forty-five, that is, when they closes 'er down again."

Tuckett paused; he was out of breath after such a long speech. Then he knocked out his pipe and started to fill it again with black shag.

"So it hasn't been used since the war?"

"No, zur. That it b'ain't. Derelict it be now, I reckon. Derelict."

Alison pressed him. "D'you mean the railway line isn't used at all now? Never?"

"No, miss. There ain't been no train down that line since 'forty-five."

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Ransome broke in: "Then why did I see a train last night?"

Tuckett raised an eyebrow. "You b'ain't seen no train, zur."

"But we both saw one," Kenton affirmed. "Just after two o'clock this morning."

Tuckett shook a gnarled forefinger at him and reiterated, "You *b'ain't* seen *no* train, zur."

Alison persisted: "Meaning you didn't see it, Mr. Tuckett?"

Silas Tuckett banged the arm of his chair decisively. "I didn't see it, miss," he affirmed, "because I stays indoors o' nights and don't go meddling with things as don't concern me. There be ghosts as walk 'angmans 'ill after midnight—and I dun like 'em. Nor any man in St. Mawgen—nor women, neither. You won't find any o' them abroad o' nights. They've no wish, no more'n I, to meet the ghost o' Black Jack, the pirate as did them turr'ble things."

While the old man was saying all this, Ransome whispered to his friend, "This isn't getting us anywhere, Snort. He's just superstitious, like all Cornish people—and half-witted."

As soon as there was a pause in Tuckett's tirade, Barbara asked him: "But, even if you were indoors, you would have heard the train, surely?"

Tuckett shook his head. "No, miss," he disagreed. "I dun 'ear nuthin' o'nights, no more'n other folks in St. Mawgen. If we b'ain't asleep we stops our ears. We've no wish to 'car Black Jack a-torturin' 'is prisoners, as they say 'e do up on 'angman's 'ill o' nights."

The Ghost Train

"So even if we saw and heard a train, nobody else in St. Mawgen did?" Kenton enquired.

Tuckett drew the back of his hand across his mouth and replied: "There *b'ain't* no train, I tells you, zur. Stands to reason when shipyard's bin derelict all these years."

Clearly there was nothing to be gained from further questioning of Silas Tuckett, so the young people left him to doze in his chair outside the door of his cottage, and walked back up the main street of St. Mawgen.

Ransome was looking very thoughtful. "Whatever anyone says," he maintained, "I'm positive a train went through that tunnel last night; a real train. And that can only mean one thing—the shipyard's being used again."

"All right," suggested Alison. "Let's walk over Hangman's Hill now and go down to Rackstone Cove and see for ourselves!"

"That," Kenton commented, "is a first-class idea."

Since the others were equally enthusiastic, they set off together up the road that led to the hill. As they did so, Poston trundled into St. Mawgen on an ancient bicycle, armed with the week's grocery list for Mullion Hall. Wobbling to a stop, he propped his bike against the post office wall, so that he could have a word with Miss Trelawney, the village post-mistress. She could always be relied on for the latest gossip.

From her, Poston was satisfied to learn that, whatever else had happened, no one had heard a train passing into the derelict tunnel last night. A few discreet enquiries at the local provision shop, when he

was ordering the groceries, proved just as satisfactory.

He then slipped into the St. Mawgen Arms for a drink, and any news he might pick up there. Three pints of cider later, he was to be seen wending his way back to Mullion Hall, pushing the old bike up the hill in front of him.

He went to his master's study to make his report as soon as he arrived.

"I hope you were discreet, Wiggs," Horncross observed, as the butler came in, mopping his face with a red spotted handkerchief.

Poston winked. "Wiggs Poston never stuck 'is neck out, guv," he said. "Nobody ain't seen nuffink last night. Black Jack keeps 'em all at 'ome."

From a gold case Horncross took out a cigar which he crackled at his ear before clipping it and applying a light. "A useful ally of ours is Black Jack," he murmured.

"I ain't surprised they're frightened of 'im," Poston confessed. "Creepy, it were, on 'angman's 'ill last night. Proper creepy."

Since Horncross said nothing in reply to this, Poston continued: "Never did fancy bein' out o' bed at nights—when I ain't crackin' a crib, o' course. Then I've me professional pride to keep me pecker up."

Horncross rose from his chair. "Well, I shan't want you out again tonight when the train does the return trip, if that's any satisfaction to you," he said. "And I shall be late for lunch to-day: ask Lady Horncross not to wait for me. I've work to do down at the shipyard."

CHAPTER EIGHT

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Landslide

RACKSTONE COVE is surrounded on three of its sides by a wall of tall grey cliffs where hundreds of sea-birds nest and circle, uttering their mournful cries. At the foot of the cliffs, at the back of the cove, there is just enough ground for the shipyard that was built there during the First World War and used again in the second. Before that, it had only been possible to approach the cove by boat ; but to serve the shipyard a track was cut up from St. Mawgen, over Hangman's Hill, and then down the rocky face of the cliffs in a series of zig-zags.

Tiger and Snort and the two girls had no difficulty in finding where this track led off from the road out of St. Mawgen, but the going over Hangman's Hill was not easy. At first the track was well-defined and in a reasonable state of repair, but after a quarter of an hour's steady tramp, the quartet ran into difficulties. Their path was now overgrown with weeds and scattered with boulders ; in many places it was indistinguishable from the rest of the ground.

"It must be ages since a lorry used this track," Kenton commented; "not since the war, I should think."

The Missing Submarine

"Even then I imagine they took the heavy stuff, like steel and timber, by train through the tunnel," said Ransome.

Kenton stopped for a moment and looked out to sea. A smudge of black smoke on the horizon showed the steady progress of a distant ship.

"Yep, Tiger," he agreed, "but the workmen must have come this way. They'd have lived in St. Mawgen."

"Unless they had houses down in the cove," interjected Barbara.

"I suppose that's possible," said Tiger. "But they, or their families, would come this way to the village to shop; and cars would come this way, too—the doctor's, for example."

"We'll soon know the answer if we keep going," Alison said. "It can't be far now before we can look down into Rackstone Cove from the top of the cliff."

"Agreed," nodded Tiger. "Come on, Snort."

As they walked on, the grass grew sparse and naked rock showed through it. Then they saw that the track turned round a steep shoulder of the hill a little way ahead of them. Surely, Alison suggested, they would begin to descend the cliffs once they were round that corner.

This prompted Snort to issue a challenge. "I'll race you round that bend, Barbara," he cried.

"Right!" Barbara agreed with a smile. "I'll see the shipyard before you do."

Alison, not to be outdone, immediately declared that she would beat them all to it, and Tiger, in his turn, accepted. So they all raced for it—only to be brought up sharply as soon as they rounded the corner.

Landslide

"Gosh!" panted Alison, "that's done it!"

A huge, untidy pile of rocks across the track prevented them from going any further, and it was easy to see where the obstruction came from. An ugly gash in the hill showed that there had been a landslide.

Tiger, panting after his run, nodded vigorously. "I'll say it has," he said. "We can't get past this, and it doesn't look as if we could climb over it, either."

Barbara had a worried expression. "I don't like the look of that rock up there," she said, with reason. She was pointing at a great boulder which was moving ominously.

"You're right," cried Tiger. "We'd better get back. There's no telling which way it will fall." Thus warned, the four young people retraced their steps—just in time. With a nasty rumbling noise, the boulder suddenly toppled over and crashed down to the track at the point where they had recently been standing.

"Phew!" gasped Snort. "That was too much of a close shave for my liking."

Tiger agreed. "It explains why no one uses this road now," he said. "Much too dangerous. But it means we're none the wiser about the shipyard."

Alison was looking thoughtful. "D'you know something, Tiger?" she said. "That landslide's new. People could have been using this track until quite recently. Weeds grow quickly."

"Perhaps," Barbara answered. "But what do we do next? How are we going to find out—?"

Her sister interrupted her. "Simple," she said. "I ought to have thought of it before. We'll ask Uncle Ralph."

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Barbara clapped her hands together. "Of course. He's sure to know," she said.

"When we go back for lunch," Alison continued, "we'll tell him about the train—and everything—and ask him what it all means."

It did not occur to Ransome and Kenton that there might be any danger in this idea. They escorted Alison and Barbara as far as the gates of Mullion Hall, and left them there after they had promised to telephone any news to them at their hotel.

When the girls entered the dining-room, rather out of breath after their exertions, they found Lady Sybil already at the table. Ungraciously, she accepted their apologies for being late, and soon Poston was hovering behind them with a dish of vegetables.

"I say!" cried Barbara. "Chips! Jolly D!"

"Ssh, Barbara," warned Alison.

But she was too late. With a severe look at her niece, Lady Sybil said reprovingly, "Alison is quite right, Barbara. Food should not be discussed at meals; and 'Jolly D' is not a lady-like expression." With the younger girl looking suitably contrite, she continued: "What have you too been up to this morning?"

Alison explained that they had been for a walk with Tiger and Snort. When Poston had withdrawn from the room, she asked: "Where's Uncle Ralph, Aunt Sybil? Isn't he coming in for lunch?"

"No, he's busy," was the short reply.

Alison persisted: "Will he be back soon?"

Lady Sybil dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "I don't know, Alison," she said. "Why are you so concerned about him?"

Landslide

"There's something we want to ask him, Aunt Sybil."

"Can't I give you the answer?"

"We hadn't thought—but perhaps you can. This morning we tried to walk to Rackstone Cove."

Lady Sybil's eyes narrowed until there was a severe frown on her face. "Rackstone Cove!" she interrupted her elder niece. "You shouldn't have done that! The road's dangerous."

The girls were surprised at their aunt's reaction. "How could we know that?" cried Barbara. "Nobody told us. Anyhow, we didn't get very far; it's blocked by a landslide."

Lady Sybil breathed a sigh of relief. "Exactly," she said. "That's why it's dangerous." She paused for a moment, then asked: "Why did you want to go to the cove?"

Alison explained that it was Tiger and Snort's idea. "They wanted to see whether the old shipyard was still being used," she said.

"There was no need for them to go near the cove: anybody in St. Mawgen could tell them it's been derelict since the war."

"Yes, we know that," Alison said—and then she dropped her bombshell. "That's what Tiger and Snort were told. But last night they saw a train go into the tunnel under Hangman's Hill."

Lady Sybil sat up with a start. "A train?" she snapped. "They must have been dreaming."

"But they both saw it," persisted Barbara.

"They were *both* dreaming," was the tart reply. "Nobody should be doing anything else at two o'clock

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in the morning—" She checked herself, realising that she had gone too far. Hoping that her indiscretion had not been noticed, she tried to cover it by finishing, "—or whenever it was. No train has used that line for years; why should it when the shipyard's closed? "

"You're sure it hasn't been re-opened recently? " Alison persisted.

"Quite sure. And it's none of your business, anyway—nor of those two midshipmen—or admirals—or whatever they are."

Alison was about to ask why her uncle had talked about a jetty in the cove but had said nothing to them about a shipyard when Lady Sybil changed the subject.

So they talked of other things until after Poston had served coffee in the drawing-room, and Lady Sybil had left the girls to themselves. Then Alison threw herself petulantly on to the settee.

"Well! " she exploded, "I don't see why Aunt Sybil had to be so stuffy at lunch to-day."

Barbara settled herself beside her. "Nor do I," she said. "I'm sure Tiger and Snort weren't pulling our legs about seeing a train."

Her sister frowned and picked irritably at a cushion. "Everybody and everything seem to be combining to stop us finding out about it," she muttered. "First Mr. Tuckett, then the landslide, and now Aunt Sybil."

"It certainly seems like it," commented her sister. "But there's still Uncle Ralph. We haven't asked him yet."

"Of course! " Alison jumped to her feet. "Come on, let's see if he's back."

The girls left the drawing-room and walked down

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the passage until they came to Sir Ralph's study. But when Alison knocked on the door, there was no reply. She knocked again, louder this time, but still without success.

Urged by Barbara, with the argument that perhaps their uncle was asleep, she turned the handle. As the door opened the girls crept inside. They found the room empty; Horncross was not at his desk, nor was the armchair occupied.

"Oh, blow," said Alison, stamping her foot. "We shall have to try upstairs." But as she moved towards the door, her sister laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"Wait, Alison," she said, "d'you hear anything?"

Alison paused to listen. Yes, there was something, a muffled sound as if someone was singing. There were distant footsteps, too. She darted to the window and looked out, but she could see nobody there.

She listened again, a puzzled expression on her fair face. Then: "I believe it's coming from behind the wall!" she whispered, and immediately had an idea. "Quick, Barbara! Behind here."

She pushed her startled sister behind an ornate eighteenth-century screen that stood in one corner of the study.

Cautiously they peered round the sides of the screen. To their astonishment they saw a section of the bookshelves, which lined the whole of one wall of the room, swing outward on hinges. And in the opening appeared their uncle.

Horncross stepped out into his study and carefully pushed the shelves back into their place again. They closed with a click, so that once again there was nothing

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unusual to be seen. Tut-tutting to himself at the filthy state of his hands, he hurried across the room and went out, closing the door after him.

This was the signal for the girls to emerge from their hiding-place. "What fun!" Barbara said excitedly; "a secret passage. I wonder where it goes to?" Crossing to the shelf-lined wall, she started tapping it in the hope of finding a hidden knob which would open the concealed door.

But her sister was thinking of something else. "Barbara," she said, "we won't ask Uncle Ralph about the train after all."

Without turning her head, Barbara asked why not.

"And we mustn't let him know we saw him use this secret door."

Barbara repeated her question. "But why not?"

"Because there's something odd going on."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. But we're not staying at home this afternoon. We're going down to St. Mawgen to see Tiger and Snort again."

"All right," Barbara shrugged. "If you think that's best. But you're making it all sound very mysterious."

"It is mysterious. That's why I can't explain."

As quietly as possible the two girls left the study, and soon they were out of the house and walking down the drive.

Lady Sybil watched them go from the window of her bedroom. When they had passed through the gate, she sat down for a while on her bed, deep in thought.

Presently, she got up and left the room. Hurrying down the broad stairway, past the stags' heads that de-

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corated the walls, she went in search of her husband. She found him in the sitting-room.

Had he seen the girls recently, she demanded. Without waiting for an answer, she continued in an agitated voice: "Have you given anything away? I ought to have warned you before I went out."

Horncross lowered his newspaper. "What on earth are you talking about, Sybil?"

His wife stuttered something about the lieutenants—midshipmen—whatever they were.

"Ransome and Kenton?" he queried.

"Yes. Have you told the girls?"

Horncross looked even more puzzled. "Told them *what?*"

"They saw the train last night." In her anxiety, Lady Sybil was not making herself at all clear.

"The girls? Impossible! They were in bed."

Lady Sybil stamped her foot irritably. "No, no," she cried, "the boys. The line runs at the back of their hotel, you know that. They must have been awake at the time. Now they're asking awkward questions: why a train should run through that tunnel when the shipyard is supposed to be derelict."

She went on to tell how the four young people had tried to walk to Rackstone Cove that morning to see it for themselves.

Horncross made a mental note to congratulate Poston on his handiwork: the butler had detonated a charge in the hillside to bring down the rocks which now blocked the track down the cliff. Aloud he said calmly, "I can't have said anything to the girls because I haven't seen them since breakfast."

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"Well, they questioned me at lunch."

It was Horncross's turn to show concern. "You didn't tell them anything?" he asked quickly.

"No, of course not," retorted his wife. "But I had a nasty moment. I believe they know more than is good for them."

"How can they know anything, except that those two boys think they saw our train last night?"

"That's making them ask questions." Lady Sybil took a cigarette from a box on the table and nervously lit it. "Youngsters can be too inquisitive, Ralph."

"Hm," Horncross frowned. "Maybe you're right there. Would you ring for Wiggs, my dear?" he said, after a moment's thought.

Poston came in, "You rang, Sir Ralph?" he asked.

"Cut the act, Wiggs. This is important. The youngsters are asking questions about the shipyard. Too many questions; and we can't run any risk that they may discover something at this stage."

Poston's reaction was characteristic. "Okay," he said. "I'll fix 'em so as they don't do no more talkin'. I'll get 'em up on 'angman's 'ill, stick a knife in their backs—and when their bodies is found, folks'll say it was Black Jack's work!"

Lady Sybil was inclined to agree. "He's right, Ralph. Better get rid of those young meddlers. As he says, the villagers will say it's the ghost's doing."

But her husband held a different view. "The villagers may say that," he counselled, "but not the C.I.D. We'll have them down here, and in Rackstone Cove, before we know where we are. No—I've a simpler idea . . . and a much safer one. . . ."

CHAPTER NINE

The Secret of Rackstone Cove

AS THE girls hurried down the hill towards St. Mawgen, Alison kept glancing behind her. She had a feeling that someone was following them ; but had she been asked why, she would not have been able to explain. She felt sure that there was something unpleasant going on. Perhaps there was a perfectly good explanation for the odd happenings at and around Mullion Hall, but just now she was a little frightened.

The two sisters hardly spoke a word until they reached the main street of the village. Miss Trelawney, who happened to be standing at the post office doorway, looked hopeful when she saw them coming. Poston was her usual source of information about what went on in Mullion Hall—and she was a great one for minding other people's business. Now if only she could have a chat with Sir Ralph's young nieces!

But she was to be disappointed. Alison and Barbara swept past her, showing no inclination to dawdle. They said only, " Good afternoon," politely but firmly, and went on their way to the hotel.

Miss Trelawney remembered the two young naval

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gentlemen who were staying there. With a knowing smile to herself she resolved to ask Mr. Poston about them when next he called to buy stamps.

Alison and Barbara asked a waiter whether Tiger and Snort were in, and were directed to the lounge. There, peering through the glass door, they saw Snort's familiar profile. Tiger was with him but hidden from view by the high back of his armchair.

With murmured thanks to the waiter, the girls opened the door and went into the room where Snort was dozing, while Tiger concentrated on *The Times* crossword.

Ransome looked up as the girls approached, and woke Kenton with a light kick on his shin.

"Hallo!" he said. "Didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"What's happened?" asked Snort.

The girls settled in the chairs that were offered to them.

"There are one or two things we thought you should know," said Alison, "about what's happened at the Hall since this morning."

Both sub-lieutenants raised their eyebrows. "Go ahead," they said, almost together.

First, Alison told them about the hidden door, through which Sir Ralph had entered his study. She was disappointed at the effect of this news. Considering the age of Mullion Hall, Tiger commented, a secret passage was to be expected. Smugglers used them.

Alison sighed and tried again. "All right," she said, "then listen to the way Aunt Sybil behaved at lunch."

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This time she succeeded in arousing Tiger's interest, when he heard about Lady Sybil's annoyance at their attempt to see the shipyard in Rackstone Cove.

Sure of her audience, Alison continued, "Perhaps this is the most interesting point: Aunt Sybil said you must have been mistaken about the train, and that you must have been dreaming because that's what everybody should be doing at two o'clock in the morning."

Ransome glanced significantly at his friend. "D'you mean she actually mentioned two o'clock?"

"Yes," confirmed Alison, "when we had said nothing about a definite time. But she realised she had made a slip, because she corrected herself by saying, 'or whatever time it was.' But she didn't sound a bit convincing when she did it."

"H'm," reflected Tiger. "There isn't much doubt about it, there's something odd going on. Tell me, what d'you really think about your uncle and aunt—if you don't mind such a question?"

Alison looked thoughtful. Then she said slowly: "Oh, they're all right. They've had us to stay with them since we arrived unexpectedly in England."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," Ransome murmured.

Barbara expressed her view. "Well, they might take a little more notice of us," she said. "After all, it's years since we were here last."

"Perhaps they don't really like children," suggested Kenton. "There are such people."

Barbara responded hotly: "*We* aren't children!"

Kenton grinned at her. "Sorry," he said. "I mean you *were*—until recently."

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Ransome suggested: "Suppose your aunt and uncle were up to something they didn't want anybody else to know about. Suppose, for example, they were smuggling! Then they wouldn't want you in the house, would they?"

"But he's a baronet—the squire of St. Mawgen—" Barbara stammered, as if any such idea as Ransome's was impossible.

"That's true," Kenton agreed. "All the same you think something queer's going on in Mullion Hall, don't you?"

"Yes," agreed both girls together.

"Well," responded Tiger, "that's my point. I'm not sure what to make of it, but you'd better keep mum about that secret door."

The girls nodded their agreement.

"And don't talk about the train again, either," Ransome ordered. "If your aunt mentions it, agree with her that we must have dreamed it."

"And if anything else odd happens," Kenton advised, "let us know. You can telephone us in the hotel at any time."

With this advice the two subs. escorted Alison and Barbara to the door where, after making a date for a drive on the following morning, they stood for a while watching the girls climb the hill to return to Mullion Hall.

They then returned to the lounge and settled again in their chairs. After quickly surveying the other occupants, an old lady who was busy knitting and a white-haired gentleman who was dozing over his newspaper, Ransome moved close to his friend.

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"I didn't want to say too much in front of the girls, Snort," he began. "I don't want them to get the wind up. But there's something going on down here which I don't like—and it might be dangerous for Alison and Barbara if, as seems possible, Mullion Hall is involved. What is happening down at the shipyard?" he concluded. "That's the point. I shan't be satisfied until I know the truth."

"Well, how are we going to find out? We haven't had much success so far."

"There's only one thing to do, Snort, see for ourselves."

"Hold on!" said a startled Kenton. "If you think I'm going to break my neck climbing over that landslide or down those cliffs—"

"No, no," interjected Ransome, "not that way, Snort. Use your brains! Through the tunnel, of course—walk through it!"

Kenton slapped his knee in excitement. "By Jove, that's an idea, Tiger!" he exclaimed. "Come on!" He half rose to his feet.

"Steady on, Snort," Ransome cautioned him. "Not now. We mustn't be seen going into the tunnel. We must wait until to-night—when it's dark."

Kenton sank back to his chair. "I suppose so," he agreed. "But we shan't see much, surely, when it's dark."

"There happens to be full moon, Snort; but we can also buy ourselves a couple of torches."

Some time later—it was around half-past six that evening—a white-coated waiter came up to Tiger, bearing an envelope on a salver.

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"Sub-lieutenant Ransome?" he enquired. "Telegram for you, sir."

"Wonder who it's from," murmured Tiger as he ripped open the yellow envelope. His face fell as he read its contents: sub-lieutenants Ransome and Kenton were required to report back to their ship to-morrow morning.

That was most unexpected. "How on earth did they know we were here?" Kenton queried.

Ransome shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose they got our address from my father," he said. He, too, was wondering what the message portended.

Kenton sniffed. "Hang it, Tiger, we're on leave."

"I know it's a bore, Snort. But we can't do anything about it. It's an order."

"Well—now we shall never solve the mystery of that train."

Ransome, however, held a different view. "Oh, yes we will," he reassured his friend.

"But how, if we're leaving for Portsmouth?"

"Easy. We'll pack our bags now and load them in the car. Then we'll leave the hotel immediately after dinner. That'll give us plenty of time to walk through the tunnel to Rackstone Cove—and be back before midnight!"

Snort seized at the idea. "And still give us enough time to drive to Portsmouth by ten to-morrow morning, eh?" he cried.

Ransome nodded: "Yep. There's no need for us to get back before ten. The roads are clear of traffic at night, and the car's run in now. We should average fifty with any luck."

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Then Kenton remembered the girls. "There's one snag," he pointed out. "We shan't know the result of our expedition until late to-night; we can't very well get into touch with Alison and Barbara then."

"No, but we can ring them to-morrow from Portsmouth—if we discover nothing, that is. On the other hand, if we do discover something queer about the shipyard—that it's being used for—" Ransome paused before continuing, "I don't know what—we may have a good excuse for not returning."

"You mean we can ring up and tell them we're needed here?"

"Better than that, Snort. If there's reason for us to stay, we'll be able to ask *the police* to ring up. Come on, now—upstairs. It's time we packed."

They went up to the room which they shared and packed their suitcases. Then they carried them down and stowed them in the car, which was parked on the cobblestones outside the hotel.

This done, they returned and entered the dining-room, despite Kenton's "Gosh! I'm too excited to eat anything."

"I'd eat, if I were you," Ransome advised him. "We've plenty to do to-night. You'll need a good meal inside you."

And, in fact, there was nothing very wrong with Kenton's appetite.

Afterwards, when Ransome was settling their bill with the manager at the reception desk in the hall, Kenton chanced to look through the door that led to the bar. He drew his friend's attention to what he had seen.

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"I say," he whispered, "isn't that the butler from Mullion Hall in there?" He pointed at a red-faced man sitting on one of the oak benches.

Poston, who had seen the two boys, quickly averted his eyes.

"You're right, Snort. Looks as if he doesn't want to be seen, either," replied Tiger. "Never mind—let's go," he added, pocketing his change. "

With a cheerful good-night to the manager, they both left the hotel and climbed into Ransome's car.

They drove first up the main road as if they were leaving St. Mawgen, but presently they came to a turning.

"If my navigation is correct," said Ransome, "this lane will take us round to the other side of the line near the mouth of the tunnel." He twisted the steering wheel and the car purred through the darkness along a narrow road fringed with overhanging trees. Soon it became bumpy and uneven, the headlamps picking out potholes in the surface, and a rabbit scampered across in front of them, its eyes gleaming brightly in the glare of the car's lights.

"We must be about there," Ransome commented after a few minutes.

A moment later he braked the car to a stop and climbed out. Kenton joined him and the pair looked around. Across the way they could see the lighted windows at the back of the hotel. On their right, running parallel with the lane for a hundred yards, was the railway cutting; and at its end was the mouth of the tunnel. The night was as quiet as an empty church.

Kenton shivered. "If you weren't here, Tiger," he

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said, "I should be seeing things — like the ghost of Black Jack!"

"So should I," Ransome confessed.

He slipped back into the driving-seat of the car and restarted the engine in order to park it clear of the lane behind a clump of trees.

This done, he asked his friend: "Torch ready, Snort?"

"Aye, aye," Kenton replied, giving it a quick flash with the lens shaded by his fingers.

"Right."

Ransome led the way down the side of the cutting on to the track, then along it until they were engulfed by the dank gloom of the tunnel.

Two slender beams of light from their torches showed them the way. Slimy moss encrusted the roof overhead and water oozed down the walls. Once, a rat scuttled between Ransome's legs. Their footsteps echoed hollowly through the tunnel, and when Kenton stumbled over a sleeper, the noise he made seemed to reverberate for an age.

"How much further d'you think it is?" Kenton asked after a while.

"Can't be far now," answered Ransome. "The tunnel's half a mile long, and I reckon we've walked well over a quarter."

They went on for another ten minutes before Ransome seized his friend by the arm and pointed ahead. The distant glimmer of moonlight was just visible on the sea.

This encouraged them to hasten their steps, and they soon emerged into Rackstone Cove. A dark mas-

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immediately outside the tunnel resolved itself into six covered railway trucks coupled together. Beyond these they saw a group of Nissen huts.

Then Ransome tapped his friend on the shoulder and pointed down towards the water. There were two slips for building ships there, and near them was a jetty on which a crane reared its jib into the sky ; but it was too dark for them to see whether all these were disused.

"We must explore further," Ransome whispered into Kenton's ear.

They moved forward, but had not gone more than ten yards before they heard a murmur of voices from one of the huts, and somebody started singing to the accompaniment of an accordion.

This was encouraging—and disturbing.

"Who d'you think they are, Tiger?" Kenton asked.

"Workmen," Ransome reasoned. "If that train came through the tunnel, there must be someone here to unload it."

"But what for?"

"That's what we're here to find out!"

They reached the building slips, but these revealed nothing: there were no half-completed ships on them, so they went down to the jetty. This was more revealing ; a long, low hull was lying alongside in the water.

Kenton stopped abruptly. "Tiger!" he whispered. "Look at that. Isn't it—? But it can't be!"

"Isn't it what?" Ransome queried.

Kenton pulled his friend a few steps forward closer to the edge of the jetty.

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"I think it's a submarine, Tiger," he said quietly.

"You're right, Snort," breathed Ransome.

"She's a fair size."

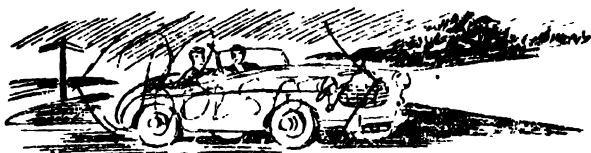
"About a thousand tons," Tiger agreed, "and completely streamlined."

With rising excitement the two sub-lieutenants peered through the darkness at the boat's conning-tower. "Looks like one of our latest," Ransome continued. "I think I can make out her name."

Slowly Kenton spelled the letters: "M-A-G-I-C-I-A-N."

"*Magician!*" Ransome, in his surprise, almost cried the word aloud: "By Jingo, Snort!" he whispered. "D'you realise what we've found?"

Kenton gave an almighty sniff. "You bet, Tiger," he said, "we've found the missing submarine."



CHAPTER TEN

And Then There Were Two

WITH open-mouthed amazement, Ransome and Kenton gaped at the streamlined shape of H.M.S. *Magician*.

"This is the biggest thing that could have happened, Snort," Ransome said in an awe-struck voice. "Two very new acting-subs. find the submarine that the Navy, the R.A.F., the police, 'M.I.5—every one's been searching for everywhere! "

"Yes," Kenton answered. "But what's it doing here, Tiger? And how did it get here? "

"It'll certainly be interesting to know the answer to both these questions," Ransome replied. "But right now we've something much more important to worry about. We've got to report this to the Admiralty as soon as we can."

He looked across the beach at the Nissen huts, in one of which they heard voices. "And if we don't get a move on," he continued urgently, "instead of standing here nattering, who knows what may happen to us? Our first job is to get back through the tunnel before anyone finds out we're here and nabs us."

"Meaning who? " Kenton queried.

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"Don't ask me, Snort. Your guess is as good as mine. Just stop nattering and—" Tiger was going to say "follow me," but his roving gaze had suddenly seen something new—something which made him rub his eyes in disbelief. Then he gripped his friend's arm and pointed to the jetty astern of the *Magician*. There, clearly visible through the moonlit darkness, was a shape which made Ransome whisper: "Am I dreaming, Snort—or is that *another* submarine?"

"It certainly looks like one," Kenton breathed, "but I don't see how it can be. The Navy's only lost one—so far as we know."

"We must have a closer look, anyway," Ransome answered.

Kenton followed his friend along the jetty until they were near enough to the second vessel to be able to confirm that it certainly *was* a submarine. Moreover, it seemed an exact replica of the *Magician*. Well, Ransome reflected, there could always be two submarines of the same class, though the Admiralty had never said anything so far about building a sister-ship to the *Magician*. But that was a small mystery when compared with something else which the two youngsters now saw. There were letters on this second submarine's conning-tower which spelt her name. And that, too, was *Magician*!

Kenton sniffed helplessly at this discovery. "I give it up," he declared. "We must really be dreaming this time."

Ransome, more realistically, suggested: "One of them must be a phoney, Snort—a copy of the real *Magician*. It could have been built here in this ship-

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yard ; the necessary materials could have been brought through the tunnel by a train, like the one we saw last night."

Kenton pondered the idea. " But that's ridiculous," he said. " The *Magician* was only reported lost a couple of weeks ago. No one could build a copy in that short time."

Ransome shrugged his shoulders. " That's a point to you, Snort: I'm baffled. But there's still one thing I'm sure of—that it's high time we got back to St. Mawgen and let the police know what we've seen here to-night."

The two subs. crept back across the shipyard towards the tunnel, taking every advantage of rocks and boulders to conceal themselves until they reached a point where there was nothing but the Nissen huts between them and the mouth of the tunnel. Now that they had learned the secret of Rackstone Cove—or at least an important part of it—those huts seemed a greater danger than when they had first ventured past them. To their great relief a wisp of cloud chose that moment to cross the face of the moon and throw the whole scene into deep shadow, and helped them to gain the mouth of the tunnel in safety, without apparently being discovered. To be inside the gloom of the tunnel was a tremendous relief to them both, especially when, looking back at the huts, Ransome saw a door open to emit a stream of yellow light. A figure stood silhouetted in it for a moment and then started to walk down to the jetty.

" We weren't a moment too soon, Snort," he whispered. " If we'd stayed there any longer . . ." But he

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didn't have to tell Kenton what might have happened to them.

They made good progress until they were nearly half-way through the tunnel. Then Kenton halted suddenly to ask his friend if he could hear anything.

From behind them came a distant rumble which echoed through the tunnel. With one foot on a rail, Ransome felt it quivering under a load. Turning round and looking back, he saw a pinpoint of light which, as he watched it, grew larger. It all added up to one unexpected happening.

"It's the train, Snort!" Ransome exclaimed. "They must have spent the day—those men we heard—unloading the trucks. Now it's coming back."

The two boys now had something much more serious to worry about.

There was not enough room in the tunnel for the train to pass them, and if they were to escape being crushed and mangled by it, they must find a plate-layer's shelter in the wall of the tunnel in which they could stand while the train went by. But where? Could they be sure of finding one? How far would they have to go? Could they reach one in time? One thing was certain: they must run like mad, run for their lives.

Kenton would never forget that race as long as he lived: it was like a nightmare. They ran along the track as fast as their legs would carry them, without exchanging a single remark, reserving all their breath for the sake of speed. Sweat poured down their faces and soaked their shirts as they searched desperately for a place of refuge, but the clatter of the approaching

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train grew louder and louder all the time, as it came nearer and nearer to them.

Then Kenton caught his foot on a sleeper between the rails, tripped over, and fell headlong. Ransome immediately stopped to help his friend to his feet, but found him bent half-double and clutching his stomach in pain.



"It's no good, Tiger," Kenton groaned, "I can't go on ; I've got a stitch—a bad one."

"You must make the effort, Snort," Ransome urged.

"We've got to find a shelter. There *must* be one."

"All right. I'll try."

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Gritting his teeth, and with Ransome's help, he forced himself to run on; but they were not going so fast, and the approaching train was getting very close.

"Suppose we don't find a shelter in time?" Snort panted.

"We shall have to lie down between the rails," Ransome answered, "and hope the train passes over us." He checked himself suddenly: "No, Snort—it's all right. Here's a shelter, after all. Into it, quick!"

Slipping into the recess in the tunnel's wall, he dragged his friend in after him. They were not a moment too soon.

The train steamed past nearly suffocating them with its acrid smoke, while the hiss of the locomotive and the clatter of the trucks almost deafened them.

"I didn't like your idea of lying down between the rails, Tiger," Kenton bellowed above the din. Then, as they thanked a merciful Providence for saving them from so great a danger, they heard a sudden crash of buffers and saw the train come to a halt with the fourth truck abreast of their hiding-place. •

Kenton's first thought was that someone must have seen them, but Ransome pooh-poohed such an idea. "No, Snort—the tunnel's too dark and this shelter's a deep one. Not that it matters if they have seen us now; as long as the train stops where it is, there's no room for anybody to walk past it to look for us."

Out of the murky darkness came a voice from up near the engine. "Okay, Ted," it said. "She'll do where she is for now."

"You want me to keep her here until two o'clock, Mike?" queried another voice—Ransome thought it

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must be the engine-driver.

"It ain't safe to take her out of the tunnel before then," came the answer.

Kenton heaved a sigh of relief. "You're right, Tiger," he said, "they haven't seen us."

"No," replied his friend, "but if that train's going to wait until two, how on earth do we get out of here? Before three o'clock in the morning, I mean. We'll never wake the police in a place like St. Mawgen at that hour."

Kenton pursed his lips. "Let's see if we can squeeze past the train now it's stopped," he suggested.

Tiger poked his head cautiously out of the shelter. The distance between the trucks and the wall, he informed his friend, was not more than six inches.

"Kenton tried another idea. "Let's have a proper look round this shelter, then," he said. "It looks more like a passage to me."

"Okay." Ransome switched on his torch. The recess did appear to go back a long way.

When they had covered a hundred yards or so, it began to rise; and when, a moment later, they turned a corner, they came to a stone stairway leading upwards.

"Why, this must come out somewhere on Hangman's Hill," Snort surmised. "I hope we don't meet the ghost of Black Jack at the top!"

Tiger laughed; like his companion, he was feeling light-hearted after his narrow escape from the train. "Ghost or no ghost, Snort," he said, "we're going up these steps!"

Ten minutes and three hundred steps later, Kenton

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clung to the clammy iron hand-rail let into the wall and panted for breath. "My legs won't carry me any further," he gasped. "I shall have to sit down and rest for a bit."

Together they sank down on to a step, and Ransome directed the beam of his torch into the gloom in front of them.

"Look Snort! " he cried suddenly. "Look, there's the end of the steps! "

They could see more than that—an oak door, framed in rusty iron.

"Thank goodness for that," was Kenton's relieved reply. "We shan't be long now before we're back in St. Mawgen. Just let me get my breath back. . . ."

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Sir Ralph Horncross lay in a steaming hot bath. Lazily extending his leg, he used his big toe to turn on the hot tap. Steam drifted up to the ceiling as more water gushed from it. He watched it with a feeling of great contentment. His plan was going very well. . . .

Presently he clambered out and began to dry himself. Then, humming softly, he went into the next room to dress. Brushing his iron grey hair, he looked in the mirror. The reflection that stared back at him was that of a man who would stop at nothing to gain what he wanted. The eyes had a bold, buccaneering look, very like those in the portrait of Sir Willoughby Horncross that dominated the library at Mullion Hall. It was a pity that Sir Ralph, unlike his ancestor, had such a weak chin.

When he had finished dressing, he snapped off the

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light and went downstairs to his study to find that Lady Sybil was already there. As he entered the room he heard a door open and close somewhere at the back of the house. He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece: the hands stood at half-past ten.

"That must be Wiggs coming in, my dear," he observed.

There was a knock and Poston entered. "I 'opes I ain't intrudin'," he began.

"You've been a long time, Wiggs," Lady Sybil snapped at him.

Poston lurched towards them, breathing heavily. "Why, it ain't later'n half-past ten," he wheezed. "I knows, 'cos pubs don't shut until ten. An' it don't take longer'n 'alf an 'our to walk from St. Mawgen to Mallion 'all. Not when I knows as 'ow the ghost o' Black Jack walks on 'angman's 'ill o' nights."

Horncross looked at Poston's coarse, bloated face. "It's all right, Wiggs: nobody's blaming you," he said.

"If there's anyfink I done as I didn't oughter..." Poston started to complain.

Horncross shook his head. "Forget it, Wiggs, and let's have the news."

The butler's watery eyes looked blank. "News?" he mumbled. Then he remembered. "Oh, them young orfficers. I fixes 'em, guv. I fixes 'em proper," he boasted.

Horncross looked at him sharply. "You're not telling me that you..."

The butler gave his employer an evil grin that revealed his yellow-stained teeth. "No, I ain't stuck a

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knife in their backs," he said. "No bloomin' fear o' that, guv. Not as I wouldn't like to have dun 'em in. Nasty little nosey-parkers," he scowled. "But that ain't what you wanted me ter do, was it? An' you can trust Wiggs Poston to do wot 'e's told."

Horncross drummed impatiently on his desk. "Don't talk so much, Wiggs. Get to the point."

"If you ask me, he's spent the whole evening in the St. Mawgen Arms," commented Lady Sybil with a shudder of distaste.

Wiggs shuffled across the room and stood in front of her, swaying unsteadily on his feet. "'Ere, if yer ladyship is suggestin' . . ."

Horncross cut him short. "What has happened to Ransome and Kenton?" he interjected firmly.

"That's wot I'm trying to tell yer," Poston complained, "only you and Lady 'orncross keeps interruptin'. Everything's okay," he continued. "Them two young gents is 'alf-way to Pompey by now."

"You're sure of that?"

"Of course." Poston explained how he had seen Tiger and Snort settling their bills before leaving the hotel, and taking their bags out and stowing them in the car. By discreetly pumping Miss Trelawney, he had confirmed that a telegram had arrived from Portsmouth ordering them to report back to their ship. "Me chum done 'is work well," he concluded "an' 'opes as 'ow you won't forget 'is services."

Horncross smiled. "A justifiable expense, Wiggs. Go on."

The butler squared his shoulders. "At nine I sees them go wiv me ovwn eyes, drivin' off towards Truro."

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Then I stands Sam 'ackett, 'im wot's a waiter at the pub, a drink. An' 'e spills the beans; them oficers told 'im they 'ad to go back sudden-like."

"Very satisfactory, 'Wiggs," acknowledged Horn-cross. "Very satisfactory."

Lady Sybil grudgingly added: "I suppose we really are rid of them now."

This was too much for Poston. "Yer *supposes!*" he exploded. "'Alf-way to perishin' Pompey, they are. You mark my words. You won't 'ear no more of 'em now. At least not until they finds as 'ow it weren't the Navy as sent 'em that telegram."

"If they ever do find out," Horncross chuckled. "The Navy won't have much time for two young officers who tell them they had a telegram the Navy never sent. They've more important things to worry about. Ransome and Kenton will go back to their homes in Kent: they won't drive all the way down here again, so we can forget all about them."

Poston put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall. "Yep," he said, "that we can. But wot abaht Miss Alison and Miss Barbara? They knows about the train, don't they?"

Horncross brushed this objection aside. "Oh, they'll forget about it when they haven't got a couple of young men to lead them into trouble."

"And I shall see that they don't go anywhere near Rackstone Cove again," Lady Sybil observed firmly. "If I wasn't sure of that I'd pack them both off back to Paris to-morrow."

Poston nodded eagerly. "Best place for 'em, if yer asks me."

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Horncross drew a key from his pocket and unlocked a drawer of his desk. "Right," he said, "that's that. Now we've other things to talk about. Take a pew, Wiggs."

He went on to discuss his plans, until Poston asked: "'Ow about Paravania? Are they goin' ter cough up?"

"I'm expecting word from their Embassy tomorrow—when I shall send a small reminder to the Admiralty."

"A reminder that the Viper isn't joking?" Lady Sybil queried, a hard glint in her eyes.

"Precisely, my dear. And as soon as they realise they're in danger of losing the *Magician*..."

Horncross stopped in the middle of a sentence. His ear had caught the sound of a slight creaking noise from the other side of the room.

Lady Sybil had heard it, too. Swiftly she rose from her chair and started to walk towards the bookshelves that lined one wall. Then she stopped.

"The passage down to the tunnel," she hissed. "Look!"

A section of the shelves began to move.

"Blimey! It's opening!" Poston exclaimed.

Three pairs of startled eyes watched as the concealed door moved again as if someone was trying to open it from the other side. Then, with a prolonged squeak, it swung out into the room.

And in the opening stood Tiger Ransome and Snort Kenton.

Tiger was the first to recover from his surprise. While the occupants of the room were still staring

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blankly in the first shock of recognition, he gripped Kenton's arm.

"Quick, Snort!" he cried, "shut the door and run for it, back the way we came!"

Kenton reacted at once to his friend's urgent plea. Together they tried to close the door which shut the secret passage off from the study. But it was heavy and Horncross was too quick for them.

"Oh, no you don't! Come out of there, the pair of you."

He seized Kenton's shoulder in a grip of steel and dragged him into the study.

Snort fought hard to escape. Grabbing hold of the screen which stood in the corner of the room, he managed to trip Horncross with the result that they both crashed to the floor, bringing the screen down on top of them.

Meanwhile, Poston had made for Ransome, who had moved into the room to help his friend, and aimed a vicious kick at his shin. Before Tiger could recover from the surprise of this attack, Poston had hurled him to the ground and pinioned him there.

Kenton, hampered by the weight of the screen, found himself at the mercy of Horncross. The owner of Mullion Hall was first on his feet, and lifted Snort bodily, his arms pinioned to his sides, and dropped him on to the settee.

"It's no good, Snort," Ransome had to admit. "We can't escape."

"If you've got that much sense," Horncross sneered, "you can explain what you were doing in that passage."

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"Don't answer him, Snort," Ransome warned quickly.

"I won't," was the equally swift answer, as Poston struck Tiger across the face with the palm of his hand. It was intended to punish him for trying to be smart, but the blow was hard enough to silence anyone. Since that was not what Horncross wanted, Poston was warned sharply not to repeat the attack.

"Nosey-parkers," was the butler's frustrated comment, as he sat astride a helpless Tiger.

Horncross continued to threaten his prisoners. "Come on, out with it, one of you," he snarled. "Tell me what you were doing."

When they continued to keep a stubborn silence, a spasm of annoyance crossed Horncross's face. "Very well," he said, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Let me tell you. To reach that passage, you must have walked through the railway tunnel. That means you've been prowling around Rackstone Cove, and the shipyard—"

Lady Sybil interrupted harshly: "And seen too much, Ralph—much too much."

Poston was shocked at this suggestion. "You means they've seen the *Magician*?" he cried. "Lumme, guv., just let me git me 'ands on 'em—"

Horncross rounded on him angrily. "Shut up, you idiot. You've done enough harm already."

"Yes," said Lady Sybil tartly, "you were quite sure these boys had gone to Portsmouth."

Kenton could not restrain an exclamation. "So you stole the *Magician*!" he cried, looking pointedly at Horncross.

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The squire of St. Mawgen went white with fury. "Yes!" he snarled. "I did. (Since you've already seen so much, you may as well know the truth. I'm the man who calls himself the Viper."

"If only you'd let me take 'em up on 'angman's 'ill, guv., and drop 'em over the cliff," Poston muttered.

"Yes," Lady Sybil agreed, "we should have let Wiggs deal with them, Ralph. It would have saved us the bother of silencing them now."

Horncross sat down at his desk. "Silencing them?" he said. "Yes, we shall have to do that. But not in a way that'll bring the C.I.D. nosing around this part of the world. That's the last thing we want just now." He leaned back in his chair and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling. "I know how to deal with them," he continued. "The turret room. We'll shut them up in there, both of them, with just enough to keep them alive, until the *Magician* is safely away."

Poston's face creased into an ugly grin. "Lumme, guv.," he exclaimed, "you always 'as the brains! Up there, in the turret, they can yell their 'eads off and no one won't 'ear 'em."

"Exactly. It's an admirable place for youngsters to meditate on the folly of meddling with other people's business—*our* business. Fetch the keys, Wiggs."

Poston showed his willingness to obey this order by the speed with which he climbed off the prostrate Tiger and left the room.

Horncross ordered Tiger and Snort to their feet, then pointed to the door: "Out you go, the pair of you," he snapped, "ahead of me."

Realising that it was probably now or never if they

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were to escape, Snort whispered to his companion as they moved towards the door of the study: "Let's yell for help, Tiger, before it's too late," Surely Alison and Barbara would hear them.

But Horncross was too quick. Whipping a revolver from his pocket, he threatened: "If either of you so much as opens your mouth again—this gun is loaded! Thank you, Wiggs," he added in a smoother tone as Poston reappeared. Then he ordered harshly: "Now move, you two—*move!*"

With Horncross armed, there seemed nothing more that they could do except to obey. So Tiger and Snort walked out of the study into the passage, with Horncross and Poston following close behind them, making sure their prisoners did not make a bolt for it. Half-way along the passage the two subs. were directed through an arched opening and up a corkscrew staircase. They guessed that this was inside the turret which was a prominent feature of Mullion Hall. When they reached a small landing at the top, Poston squeezed his way past them and unlocked a heavy oak door. As he stood to one side, Horncross gave the two boys a heavy shove.

"Get in there!" he rasped.

Ransome and Kenton staggered through the doorway and half stumbled towards the floor. Before they could recover their balance, the door slammed behind them. Then, to their dismay, they heard the key turn in the lock, followed by the footsteps of their captors as they descended the corkscrew stairs. So now they were prisoners in a tiny room, in complete darkness except for a thin beam of moonlight which came

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through a small window high in one wall, well above their heads.

"Are you all right, Snort?" Ransome asked.

"I think so," replied his friend. "No bones broken, anyway. Only a few bruises. How about you?"

"I'm okay."

"That's something to be thankful for, at least."

"We're in a jam all the same, Snort, a nasty jam."

"But we've discovered much more than we ever expected—the *Magician*, who pinched her, and that Horncross calls himself the *Viper*."

"But not why there are two *Magicians*."

"No. That's very queer."

"It's easy to see why Alison and Barbara weren't wanted here for their holidays."

"Gosh, yes! We might have guessed that nobody but a pair of crooks would be so heartless."

"We know enough to put them both in jug for years—when we tell the police about them."

Kenton sighed. "But how on earth are we going to do that now?"

"That's our big problem, Snort. But we've got to find a way. The Admiralty must be told about the *Magician*."

"It's easy to say that . . ." Kenton went on to point out that the door of their prison was too thick to break down, that the window was too high for them to reach and too small for them to climb through. Moreover, it must be at least fifty feet from the ground outside, so that he did not see how they could escape.

"All the same," said Ransome when he had finished, "we've got to get out of here somehow, Snort."

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Kenton gave one of his habitual sniffs. "All right, you tell me how," he said.

Though Ransome smiled when he answered his friend, there was a characteristic thrust of determination to his jaw. "Frankly, I haven't an idea at the moment," he said, "but we're going to think of one, Snort. We've got to. There's so much at stake—much more than just you and me."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Appointment with the Viper

FOR THE next morning—the morning after Ransome and Kenton's nocturnal exploration of Rackstone Cove—the Admiralty had summoned an important conference, to be held in the Third Sea Lord's room, with Admiral Dashwood himself in the chair.

Of those required to attend the meeting, Professor Rockingham, the distinguished physicist, was the first to arrive. As the admiral rose to greet him, the summer sun that streamed in through the window illuminated both men's faces. They were lined with worry.

The two men exchanged brief greetings to the accompaniment of the murmur of London's traffic which filtered into the room through the open window. Then Rockingham asked the question which was always uppermost in his thoughts when he came to the Admiralty. He spoke with childlike eagerness, making no attempt to disguise his anxiety.

"You have news of my submarine, the *Magician*, Admiral?"

Admiral Dashwood motioned the physicist into a chair at the table that had been arranged for the

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morning's conference, and sat down himself at its head.

"If you mean have we found her, Rockingham," he said wearily, "the answer is no. But the Cabinet has authorised payment of the gold which this black-guard who calls himself the Viper has demanded for her return."

Rockingham flushed with anger and thumped the table with his fist. "A million pounds!" he cried. "But even if you pay this fantastic sum, how can you be sure that the Viper will really return the *Magician*?"

By way of answer the Third Sea Lord rose and touched a bell-push on his desk. A moment later, in response to the call, two naval officers entered the room. Admiral Dashwood introduced them to the professor: they were Captain Donaldson, who was Director of Operations, and Captain Cole, a member of the Naval Intelligence Division, and both of the Admiralty Staff.

When they had taken their places at the table, Dashwood consulted a typewritten sheet that lay in front of him and outlined the latest developments in the affair of the missing submarine for Professor Rockingham's benefit. A notice, he said, had been inserted in *The Times*, replying to the Viper's letter and agreeing to its terms. The Admiralty had since received another letter giving detailed instructions for paying the money and explaining how they could then recover the *Magician*.

Captain Cole filled in the details. "The *Magician* will be in a position fifty miles north-west of Land's

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End at nine o'clock in the morning the day after tomorrow. She will be in tow of a tug belonging to the Viper. We are required to send our own tug to that position with the gold on board. As soon as the gold has been transferred to the Viper's tug, the *Magician* will be handed over to our tug."

Captain Donaldson added to the story. "H.M.S. *Brandon*—she's an Admiralty tug, Professor Rockingham," he explained, "is now loading the gold at Devonport. She's due to sail early the day after tomorrow to keep the rendezvous off Land's End. After transferring the gold, she'll return to Plymouth with the *Magician* in tow."

The professor, a puzzled look on his face, looked at each of the three officers in turn. "But I can't believe this," he cried. "It's impossible—impossible," he repeated. "If you know where the *Magician* will be the day after to-morrow, you can send a warship to seize her and the Viper's tug without paying a penny of this preposterous ransom. Why, you might capture this Viper fellow at the same time."

Captain Cole sighed. "I'm afraid it is not as simple as that," he said. "The *Magician* will be carrying a powerful explosive charge. The Viper has warned us not to send a warship or aircraft anywhere near the position, and our tug must be completely unarmed. Otherwise the *Magician* will be blown sky-high."

"That would certainly stop her being sold," Dashwood broke in, "but it would also mean the total loss to us of three years' work, and we can't afford that. We need to build a fleet of nuclear submarines: we can't do that until we've tried out the first. The

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Government has decided to pay the Viper's price, but once the submarine is back in our hands, it should be possible to catch the scoundrel and recover the gold. If he does manage to slip away—well, that's a risk we shall have to take."

Professor Rockingham hunched his shoulders in a gesture of defeat. "So our hands are tied," he lamented. "We must take the Viper at his word."

"That's the true position, Rockingham," the Third Sea Lord answered. "I'm afraid, much as I regret to have to say it, that we have no alternative." He turned to the Director of Operations, sitting on his left. "One other point, Donaldson," he continued. "I intend to go out in the *Brandon* myself—to see that this operation is properly carried out."

"Aye, aye, sir," acknowledged Captain Donaldson, making a note of the point on a sheet of paper.

As he did so, Dashwood turned to the professor: "And if you care to come with me, Rockingham—?"

The Third Sea Lord did not need to complete the invitation. The eager expression which suddenly transformed the scientist's face was sufficient answer to his question.

"Very well," said Dashwood. "Be so good as to make the necessary arrangements for us, Donaldson."

"I will, sir." The Director of Operations made a further note.

The Third Sea Lord spoke again. "I see no reason why the *Magician* should not be safely in the hands of the Navy again by this time the day after to-morrow," he said, then glared fiercely at the representative from the Naval Intelligence Division. "After that," he

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declared emphatically, "I want the Viper smoked out of his nest—wherever that may be."

Captain Cole accepted the order. "M.I.5 will do all that they can, sir," he promised.

"I should hope so," Dashwood growled, then rose from his chair. "I think that's all for to-day, gentlemen...."

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Next morning a big black saloon car streaked along the Mall, up through Hyde Park and out into the Edgware Road. Presently it turned off and made its way through the dingy streets of the Paddington district. A red and white flag flew on the bonnet, identifying Admiral Dashwood as one of its passengers. His companion was Professor Rockingham.

Just before eleven o'clock, the car drew up at the entrance to Paddington Station. The uniformed driver left his seat and opened the door to allow his passengers to climb out. Dashwood and Rockingham then walked through the booking hall on to the platform, followed by a porter carrying their suitcases.

A first-class compartment had been reserved for them on the Cornish Riviera. As soon as the porter had swung their bags up on to the racks, they took their seats. A minute later, the guard's whistle blew and the platform began to slip past as the express moved slowly out of the terminus, then began to gather speed for its journey to the west.

The two men hardly spoke a word until London and its suburbs had been left behind. Then, when the train was travelling through fields bathed in sunshine, Dashwood put down his newspaper and com-

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mented, "Does one good to see the country again. How I hate London."

But Rockingham had no thoughts except for the operation which the Admiralty had planned for the next day. "Perhaps it's too risky to have a warship or an aircraft somewhere around when the gold is handed over to the Viper's tug," he said. "But why shouldn't we have armed men aboard the *Brandon* who might overpower her crew?"

Slowly Dashwood shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't do that, Rockingham," he said. "Not that I wouldn't like to do so. You know me well enough for that. I'd give anything to scupper the blighter, but we can't risk it. Recovery of the *Magician* is so important—you must see that. So the *Brandon* will carry her normal crew—two officers and ten ratings, no more. And they'll be unarmed."

The train was on time when it steamed into Plymouth North Road station, where a car was waiting to take them to Mount Wise, to Admiralty House, the C.-in-C. Plymouth's headquarters. With this officer the Third Sea Lord and the professor held a brief conference, then retired to their rooms. Knowing that they had to rise early next day, they wanted to snatch what sleep they could.

To Rockingham it seemed that his head had hardly touched the pillow before he was being shaken into consciousness again. Dressing quickly, he joined Dashwood for breakfast; then the two men drove into Devonport dockyard, to board the *Brandon* at her berth alongside. They were met by the tug's captain, Lieutenant Jackson."

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Climbing the ladder to the *Brandon's* bridge, Dashwood drew Rockingham's attention to the wooden cases stowed abaft the tug's towing winch, which contained, he said, the bullion to be paid to the Viper.

Soon after four o'clock the *Brandon* slipped from her berth and steamed down the Hamoaze and out into Plymouth Sound. An hour later she was on a south-westerly course, with the Eddystone Lighthouse astern and Land's End ahead.

"It'll be nine o'clock before we reach the rendezvous, sir," Lieutenant Jackson reported after he had consulted the chart.

"Brumph!" grunted the Third Sea Lord. "Then we can't expect to sight anything before eight."

"No, sir."

"Very well." Dashwood turned to his companion. "I think we might go below, Rockingham," he said.

The tug was pitching gently into a westerly swell, so that the professor was willing to agree with the admiral's suggestion. Never a good sailor, he was feeling that it would be best if he could lie down for a bit. . . .

Three hours later, Jackson sent a message down from the bridge: "Tug sighted. And when Dashwood conveyed the news to Rockingham, all the professor's qualms that he might disgrace himself by being seasick in front of the Navy, were forgotten in his excitement.

The two men hurried up the ladder to join Jackson on the bridge. Raising his glasses to look ahead, Dashwood saw the black shape of the tug clearly outlined against a sea that sparkled in the morning sun. More

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important, well to the right of the tug was the low-lying hull of a submarine. The length of the tow, he realised, would be sufficient to ensure the tug's safety should the Viper be forced to carry out his threat to blow up the submarine.

Passing the glasses to the professor, the Third Sea Lord growled: "Here, see her for yourself, Rockingham."

"Yes, yes, I see my submarine," the scientist said when he had managed to focus the glasses for his own short sight. "You're sure they won't destroy her?" he pleaded.

Dashwood brushed such fears aside. "Certainly not," he snapped, "since we shall transfer the gold as we've been told to do. It'll take an hour or more, though: bullion's heavy stuff, you know."

This didn't comfort Rockingham. The Viper, he suggested, might have fitted a time-fuse which would destroy the *Magician* after the *Brandon* had taken her in tow.

Dashwood pooh-poohed this idea and Lieutenant Jackson turned from the compass to add: "They'd have to set a fuse several hours ahead to be on the safe side, sir. They wouldn't want her to blow up before they'd got well away, and that'll give us plenty of time to board the *Magician* ourselves after we've taken her in tow, and remove the fuse."

The professor accepted this reasoning with a sigh of resignation. But, as the breeze that played across the bows of the *Brandon* disturbed his scanty grey hairs, he wished devoutly that the whole business was over and done with. •

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"D'you think the Viper himself is on board that tug?" he queried, after a pause.

"I'd like to think he was," Dashwood replied. "Give me a chance to tell the crook what I think of him; but he won't risk falling into a trap. I imagine that tug's manned by hired men—small fry, who aren't worth worrying about."

Presently the *Brandon* was close enough for them to see a man in an old blue jersey and sea-boots standing on the tug's bridge. Using a pair of hand-flags he passed a message to the *Brandon*, whose signalman reported: "They want us to go alongside, sir."

Since the sea was certainly calm enough for this Lieutenant Jackson glanced at the Third Sea Lord for his agreement, then conned his ship alongside the other tug. As he did so, half a dozen unshaven ruffians appeared on her deck to take the securing lines passed across by the *Brandon's* crew. Then, after a brief exchange of words between Jackson and the skipper of the other tug—Admiral Dashwood had said that there was to be no argument—the laborious task of transferring the cases of gold bullion from one vessel to the other was begun.

Whilst this was going on, Rockingham divided his time between watching the men working, and looking through glasses at the grey shape of the *Magician* lying several hundred yards away on the end of the long towing wire. He was not sure which sight amazed—and annoyed—him most: seeing so much gold being handed over to the Viper's villainous crew, or his own submarine lying there, so near and yet so far.

The job took rather more than an hour to finish,

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but at long last the final case was passed across to be prized open and its contents checked, like all that had gone before. And when the total had been agreed the lieutenant addressed the other skipper: "Okay. I'm ready to take over the sub."

The answer was an unexpected one. "Maybe you're ready," rasped the blue-jerseyed figure, "but I'm not."

Jackson bristled: "What d'you mean by that?" he demanded.

"I'm not giving you the tow yet."

"Why not? You've got the gold."

Before replying, the man on the other tug's bridge cut off a plug of tobacco, stuffed it in his mouth and began chewing it. "Aye, we've got the gold," he said, "but you'll wait until six this evening afore I give you the sub."

Admiral Dashwood had been listening with mounting indignation. "What the deuce d'you mean?" he bellowed. "Why should we wait until six?"

The man wasn't put out by the admiral's bluster. "Them's my orders," he said calmly.

"Whose orders, man?"

With deliberate precision, the skipper of the tug spat over the side before he answered: "Guv'nor's orders. If we was to give 'er to you now, how'd we know you wouldn't send ships and planes after us—to get your gold back? But we'll be safe by six o'clock. It'll be dark then afore you can send anything after us."

Dashwood's face reddened with anger. "Then why the blazes didn't you fix this rendezvous for later in the day?" he roared.

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"Guv'nor reckoned it were safer for us to come out during the night."

"But it's only eleven o'clock now, man."

The Viper's henchman showed no concern. Pausing only to send another stream of yellow tobacco juice into the sea, he declared: "Aye, and seven hours you'll 'ave to wait 'ere. But you won't come to no 'arm—nor the sub., neither." And with this parting shot, he disappeared into the tug's wheelhouse.

"This is very unexpected, isn't it, admiral?" Professor Rockingham was forced to observe.

"Unexpected?" snapped the Admiral. "Of course it is. Wrecked my plans." For the first time he disclosed that as soon as the *Brandon* had the *Magician* in tow, he had intended to wireless the C.-in-C. at Plymouth. In less than an hour, aircraft, already standing by at Culdrose, would have arrived to shadow the Viper's tug. After that it would have been a simple task to bring destroyers to the scene, to board the tug and retrieve the gold.

"As it is, Rockingham," Dashwood concluded bitterly, "it'll be too late to do that at six o'clock—too near sunset and darkness. And by to-morrow morning that tug and her cargo will be safe where we can't find her—or the gold."

The scientist mopped his brow. "The Viper's a clever man, Admiral—a very clever man," he sighed, wistfully eyeing the sleek lines of the *Magician* which lay so tantalisingly near at hand and yet so far away.

"He's too clever by half," growled Dashwood. "He's scored off us all the way along over this business."

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The captain of the *Brandon* interrupted them: "You wish me to lie here until six o'clock, sir?"

Dashwood gripped the bridge handrail tightly. "Yes," he said, "for seven hours, Jackson—because there's nothing else we can do." He shook his fist angrily at the other tug. "But, by Jupiter, if ever I get my hands on the blighter who calls himself the Viper, I'll—I'll—" Words failed him, but the scowl on his face was enough to show what he meant.

As the hours dragged slowly by, the admiral stumped up and down the bridge of the *Brandon*, pausing every now and then to give an angry glance at the other tug. But Professor Rockingham, exhausted after rising so early, went below to a cabin and tried, without success, to sleep.

The sun reached its zenith, then slowly sank towards the west and the sky mellowed towards evening. And all the time the two tugs floated alongside each other whilst the *Magician* remained on the end of the towing hawser.

Then, at last, it was six o'clock. The skipper of the Viper's tug reappeared on his bridge and signified that he was ready to hand over the submarine. Dashwood called Rockingham up from below to watch the *Brandon* take over the towing-wire from the other tug.

When this had been done, and the wire had been properly secured aft, the tobacco-chewing skipper of the other tug gave an impudent toot on his whistle, rang down for full speed on his telegraph, and steamed away into the gathering dusk.

Dashwood heaved a sigh of relief. "Well," he said,

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"that's that—at last. Those were the most infuriating hours I've ever spent. By Jupiter, I'd like to wring that confounded skipper's neck. However," he gave a shrug to his shoulders, "beggars can't be choosers. And beggars we've had to be in this business to get the submarine back." He turned to the *Brandon's* skipper. "Jackson," he went on, "before we get under way I want the *Magician* boarded and thoroughly searched for an explosive charge."

"Right, sir," was the reply. "I'll get the boat out and send my Number One over with a search party."

"Very good." Dashwood looked at the professor. "And I'd be obliged if you'd go as well, Rockingham. You'll know best where they'd hide an explosive charge. Now we've got the *Magician* back, I'm not running any risk of her blowing up before we can tow her into Plymouth."

The sun had set and darkness was not far away when the *Brandon's* boat was lowered. As she was pulled towards the *Magician*, Rockingham's heart beat faster: at last he was to board her and see his wonderful invention again!

From the bridge of the Admiralty tug, Dashwood watched the professor, through his glasses, board the submarine and saw him climb the conning-tower. He expected him to disappear down the hatch, inside the vessel, to carry out a thorough search of her. Instead, he was surprised, not to say irritated, to see Rockingham hesitate, then return almost at once into the boat, which began pulling back to the *Brandon*.

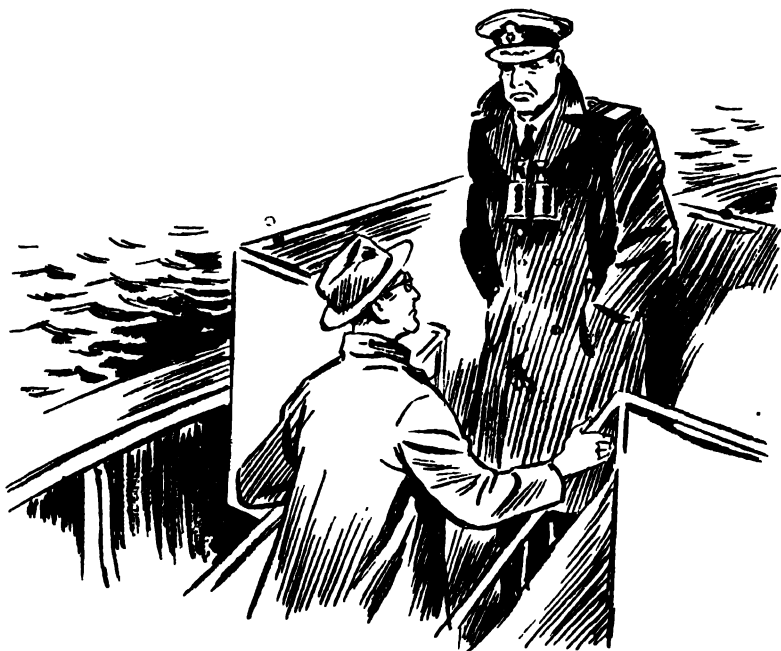
Muttering to himself impatiently, the admiral had to wait for the boat to come within hailing distance

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before he could bellow an enquiry. "Why have you come back, Rockingham? You haven't searched the *Magician*, have you? You haven't even been below, man."

"I will explain in a minute, Admiral—as soon as I am back on board."

This answer did nothing to curb Dashwood's impatience. He realised, however, that there were



limits to what he could say to the professor, who was, after all, a civilian to whom he could not bark a direct order as he would to a naval officer. .

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At last the *Brandon's* boat was back alongside and the scientist was climbing the ladder to the bridge.

"Well?" Dashwood demanded before the professor had reached the top step.

"Something terrible has happened, Admiral. Something terrible!" From his agitated tone it was evident that the professor was most upset about something.

"Go on, man."

"I really don't know what to say, Admiral, but . . ."

"Well?" Dashwood's curt interjection did little to help the professor to produce an answer.

"Something terrible has happened."

"So you said before! Come, pull yourself together, man. What has happened?"

But the professor's feelings were too deep for him to find words with which to reply. Slowly he raised an arm and pointed at the long, low hull lying on the end of the towing hawser, and now only just visible in the dusk. "It—it—isn't—" he stuttered.

"It isn't what, man?"

"It isn't the—*Magician*." At last the professor had said it.

Dashwood recoiled a pace as if he'd been struck a blow. "Not the *Magician*!" he roared. "What the blazes do you mean, Rockingham? I'd recognise her anywhere."

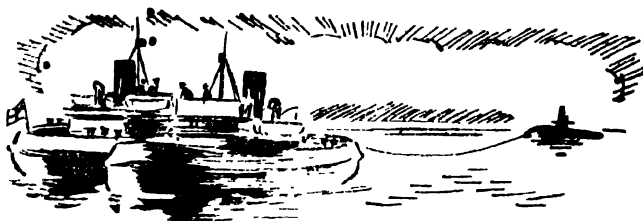
The professor was near to tears now. "It—it—it isn't even a submarine!" he murmured. "It's a dummy—made of wood!"

For one terrible moment there was silence on the *Brandon's* bridge whilst Dashwood's face coloured a brilliant crimson. Then he shook his fists at the

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heavens. "Rockets and starshell!" he swore. "D'you hear that, Jackson? We've been sold a pup! The Viper's given us a wooden dummy in exchange for our million pounds. By Jupiter! He's played us all for suckers, the whole Admiralty. This is a black day for the Navy, Rockingham, a black day for England."

He thought for a moment, then squared his shoulders and turned again to the *Brandon's* captain. "We'll have to sink that dummy, Jackson," he declared. "Can't leave it drifting—it's a danger to shipping. But as soon as you've done that we'll return to Plymouth at full speed." He turned once more to the professor. "The sooner we're back in London, Rockingham, the better. I'm going to move heaven and earth to find this Viper. We've got to get back that bullion."



CHAPTER TWELVE

Distress Signal

AT AN early hour the next morning an alarm clock whirred noisily at the side of Sir Ralph Horncross's bed. He woke with a start and his arm shot from beneath the blankets to silence it. Then he sprang from his bed and began quickly to dress.

As soon as he was ready, he quietly left his room and crept downstairs to the study. Crossing to the wall that was lined with bookshelves, he pressed the button controlling the door to the secret passage. With a slight creak it swung back and he passed through. Pausing to close the door and make sure that it was securely shut, he began walking down the steps, using a powerful torch to light the way.

By this route he reached the railway tunnel and thence emerged into Rackstone Cove. Rubbing his hands briskly, for there was a nip in the air, he walked across to the nearest Nissen hut. A figure in a blue jersey was crouched over the stove.

The man rose and greeted him with a muttered: "' Mornin', g'uv'nor," but Horncross did not return the courtesy. He only asked, " Any sign of the tug coming in yet? "

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"She b'ain't reported yet," was the reply, "but she should be in pretty soon now. It's nigh on seven."

"Right!" Horncross replied. "Come along with me."

Together the two men walked out of the hut and made their way down to the jetty. Almost as soon as they reached it the expected tug appeared round the western point of the cove. Five minutes later she was nosing her way alongside, to be secured there by her crew.

Horncross was the first to board her. He had already seen, as the tug approached, the wooden cases stacked on her after deck around the towing winch. He raised the top of one case and lifted out an ingot and, by its weight, satisfied himself that it was gold. Then, to the waiting skipper of the tug, he gave a curt order which was passed on to the crew. And while they turned to the task of transferring the cases to the jetty, and into a lorry which the man from the Nissen hut had driven out of a nearby shed, he had a further word with the skipper, whose name was Trenaman.

"All present and correct, guv'nor," Trenaman announced in a strong Cornish accent, pushing his greasy cap to the back of his head.

"Good work," Horncross congratulated him. "Any trouble collecting the stuff?"

Trenaman rubbed his hands down the side of his trousers. "Everything went smooth as clockwork, guv'nor."

Horncross allowed himself to smile. "I'd have liked to have seen the Navy's face when they discovered we'd sold them a dummy."

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Trenaman spat on to the concrete jetty. "Lot o' stuffed shirts," he observed contemptuously.

When all the gold was ashore and stowed in the lorry, Horncross went with it up to the back of the shipyard, to the cliff face to one side of the railway tunnel. Here they drove just inside the entrance of a cave, to where the way was barred by a stout iron door. Producing a key, Horncross unlocked it. Then he snapped an order and the men began the task of transferring the gold from the lorry into the strong-room which had been built in the cave.

Horncross checked each ingot himself as it was stored away. Only when he was satisfied that he had acquired gold to the value of a million pounds did he dismiss the men and shut and lock the iron door again.

Outside the cave he had a final word with Trenaman. "A good morning's work!" he said. Then he allowed the skipper to follow his crew to their quarters in the Nissen huts where breakfast awaited them.

Horncross himself returned by way of the railway tunnel and the secret passage to Mullion Hall. From his study he went to his wife's room where Lady Sybil was waiting for him. When she heard her husband's news she expressed as much satisfaction as her nature would allow.

He repeated the story briefly to Wiggs Poston when the butler arrived bearing a telegram that had arrived with the morning post.

That its contents were most satisfactory was clear from Horncross's reaction on reading it. "More good news!" he cried. "From the Paravianian Embassy. They've accepted my price—they're willing to buy

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the *Magician* for two million dollars!

Poston gaped. "Dollars," he echoed. "Wot'll we do wiv dollars? Yer can't spend 'em 'ere, can you?"

Horncross laughed. "We don't need them here, Wiggs," he said. "They'll be placed to our joint account in a bank in that South American state I've mentioned to you before. I've plans for turning the bullion into cash and depositing that in the same place; in that way we'll be able to use it all wherever we choose to settle abroad. In fact, we're well on the way to resolving our money problems for good and all. And that," he could not resist adding to his wife, "includes satisfying your expensive tastes, my dear Sybil."

Lady Sybil scowled at him. "My expensive tastes, indeed," she exclaimed tartly. "What about *your* gambling?"

Horncross shrugged his shoulders. "Only an occasional flutter, my dear," he said as he lit a cigarette.

Lady Sybil expressed her irritation at this reply by grinding her heel into the carpet. "And when," she asked, "do we hand over the *Magician* to Paravania?"

"On Tuesday," answered her husband.

Poston added jubilantly: "An' after that, me lady, we shall all be on easy street; we shan't never 'ave nuffink to worry abaht again."

Lady Sybil's mouth hardened. "Unfortunately there's one thing—one *little* thing," she observed in an icy voice, "which you've both forgotten. There are two inquisitive naval officers shut up in the turret room. What are you going to do with them?" She broke off to glare first at her husband and then at

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Poston before she went on: "As I thought, you've forgotten them. You'd allow them to ruin everything."

Horncross gave a cynical laugh. "I had *not* forgotten them, my dear," he said.

Poston rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Best bash 'em on the 'ead, up on 'angman's 'ill, and drop 'em over the cliff, like I says all along," he growled.

An expression of distaste showed on Horncross's face. "Much too crude, Wiggs; much too crude."

"If you imagine you're going to leave them locked up until someone finds them . . ." his wife began.

"I don't imagine anything," Horncross retorted. "The problem of what to do with those young meddlers must be very simple."

"What, then?"

"A solution will occur to me—after we've sold the *Magician*."

Lady Sybil's answer was a contemptuous sniff. "I hope so, Ralph, I certainly hope so."

"That being settled, Sybil," Horncross continued, rubbing his hands together, "we can now discuss plans for handing over the *Magician* to Paravania to-morrow. She'll have to sail to-night soon after—"

He was interrupted by the sound of his nieces' voices in the passage outside. Poston hastily assumed his usual pompous manner.

"Very good, sir," he said, opening the door. He allowed Alison and Barbara to enter, then went out of the room.

"Good morning, Uncle Ralph," Barbara greeted her guardian cheerfully. "You were up very early."

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"Your uncle has been busy," Lady Sybil retorted sharply.

Alison looked as if she didn't believe it. "Before breakfast?" she said. "What a bore!"

Anxious to steer clear of a possibly dangerous topic, Lady Sybil asked how the girls planned to spend the day. "It's a lovely morning," she said, "I'm sure you'll want to be out and enjoy it."

"Of course we do, Aunt Sybil," answered Alison, "as soon as we've made a trunk call. We may, mayn't we?" she asked innocently.

"We want to ring up Tiger Ransome's home to find out why he and Snort left St. Mawgen in such a hurry," Alison explained.

"Yes," added Barbara, "without even saying good-bye to us."

A warning glance flashed from Horncross to his wife.

"If those young men were so rude as to leave without a word of explanation you'd better forget about them," was his firm reply.

His wife supported him. "Your uncle is quite right, Alison," she said. "I understand that you liked those two boys—so did we, very much. But you hadn't known them for very long, had you—and first impressions can be misleading." She wagged an admonitory finger. "It's now clear, as your uncle says, that they lack manners—indeed, they were very discourteous, leaving St. Mawgen without a word to any of us."

"I see what you mean," Barbara answered, but she could not refrain from adding, "All the same, why *did* they leave so suddenly—in such a hurry?"

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Their uncle eased his feet apart and clasped his hands behind his back. "I can satisfy your curiosity," he said. "Poston happened to be in the St. Mawgen hotel on the night they left. One of the waiters told him that Ransome had had a telegram ordering them to report back to their ship as soon as possible."

"But even so, they might have telephoned!"

"Exactly," Lady Sybil agreed. "And the fact that they did not do so only shows up their bad manners. The best thing you can do is to forget all about them," she concluded decisively.

Alison looked at her sister. "I suppose Aunt Sybil's right," she said slowly. "After all, they haven't written to us, either."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," responded Barbara. Then, as if putting the matter out of her mind, she added: "How about a game of tennis, Alison?"

"All right. Three sets. And I bet I win!"

As soon as the girls were out of earshot, Lady Sybil snapped: "Wretches! Telephone Ransome's home, indeed! There would be no end of awkward questions if they got through to his parents. Then what would we do?"

Horncross spun round on his heel and made for the door. "The point is of no interest," he answered, "since we've made sure that the girls don't do anything so awkward."

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On the Mullion Hall tennis court the girls were in the middle of a rally. As the ball went back and forth across the net, Alison, in a desperate attempt to return a cunning volley, lost her footing and fell.

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"Game and set. Six-three. What did I tell you?" Barbara cried, jumping the net to go to the help of her sister.

"You wait!" Alison retorted as she picked herself up. "We're playing two more sets."

"A rest first," Barbara pleaded.

"All right, but not more than five minutes," conceded her sister.

The girls crossed the court to sit on a wooden seat in the shade of a leafy oak tree. For a few moments they listened to the drone of bees coming from the hives in the kitchen garden. Then Barbara said tentatively, "Alison, did you believe that stuff of Aunt Sybil's and Uncle Ralph's about bad manners? Did they really mean it? Or was it their way of stopping us getting into touch with Tiger and Snort?"

"You know how old-fashioned people like Aunt Sybil can be," was her sister's reply.

"Yes, I know. All the same, d'you really think Tiger and Snort would have left without sending some sort of message to us? Because I don't. I believe they're here still."

Alison frowned. "Here still?" she repeated. "What d'you mean, Barbara? Where?"

Barbara was thoughtful. "I don't know," she answered. "But I intend to find out. I vote we 'phone Tiger's home some time when Aunt Sybil and Uncle Ralph are away from the house."

Alison looked dubious. "H'm," she said, "Poston might let the cat out of the bag."

"Then let's go into St. Mawgen and telephone from the post office."

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Alison considered the idea. "All right, Barbara. We'll do that to-morrow, if we haven't had a letter from either of them by then." Having settled the point, she jumped to her feet. "Now I'm going to beat you six-love," she cried.

"Oh, no you're not!" Barbara answered as she ran on to the court, the light of battle in her eyes.

All this time the two subjects of their conversation were little more than fifty yards away. Despite the summer heat outside the house, the turret room was chilly.

"How long have we been here now, Tiger?" Kenton asked wearily—not because he did not know but for something to say.

"Three days," Ransome answered disconsolately. "Three days too long," he added, beating the bed on which he was sitting with his fists.

"Seems more like three months to me!" was Kenton's reply.

"It's certainly not my idea of a holiday," Ransome said. "All the same, it can't be long now before somebody rescues us. The *Watchful* will have wondered why we haven't returned; they'll have asked our parents whether they know anything, and they'll have told the police that we're missing."

Kenton began pacing the restricted floor of their prison. "It's all very well to say that," he answered, "but nobody succeeded in finding the *Magician* before we did. So I don't see why they should be more successful in finding us." He ran a despairing hand through his dark hair.

"Then look at it this way," Ransome reasoned. "It

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can't be long now before Horncross squeezes a ransom out of the Admiralty."

"Or, if they won't pay, sells the *Magician* to some other country — Paravania, perhaps," Kenton interjected.

Ransome looked at him in dismay. "Paravania?" he cried. "But they can't be allowed to do that!"

Kenton's reply to this was never spoken. His keen ears had suddenly caught the sound of a ball being hit and of girls' voices outside in the garden. "Why," he cried excitedly, "that must be Alison and Barbara playing tennis. Now, if only we could find some way of letting them know we're up here, they'd have us out of this miserable hole in two jiffs!"

Ransome's eyes lit up. "Snort," he said. "You're a genius! You've given me an idea. D'you remember where the tennis court is? Can we see it from here?"

Kenton looked at the tiny window and shook his head. "We could, if the window wasn't so high up," he said. "The court's on this side of the house."

"Then Alison and Barbara can see the window from the tennis-court," Ransome argued.

"I think so," Kenton admitted.

"Right. Then listen, Snort . . ."

Five minutes later they had made a weighted ball out of Ransome's handkerchief and Kenton's pocket knife, and secured it to a line several yards long which, for want of string, they made by tearing a bed sheet into strips.

Ransome uttered the warning, "Now, stand clear, Snort."

At the first attempt he failed to throw the hand-

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kerchief ball out of the window. It bounced off the wall on to the floor. But the second try was luckier ; the ball went through and dropped as Tiger paid out the linen line. When there was a good two yards of it outside he began to jerk it up and down.

By this time Alison and Barbara had finished another set and were again taking a breather. Sitting on the bench by the side of the tennis court, they faced the handsome west front of Mullion Hall. "It's a lovely old place, isn't it, Barbara," Alison murmured as she looked at the mellow walls, the mullioned windows and the twisted Elizabethan chimneys.

"Yes," agreed her sister, gazing up at the ivy-covered turret which formed one corner of the building until her eye was arrested by something which appeared to be hanging from the topmost window. A slender strip of something white appeared to be jerking up and down. She drew Alison's attention to it.

"How odd," was the response. "It looks like a handkerchief or something—as if someone was trying to signal."

Barbara looked puzzled. "But I thought nobody used the turret room," she commented.

Alison answered: "So did I. So this wants looking into. D'you know where Aunt Sybil and Uncle Ralph are now? "

"I saw them leave in the car about half an hour ago," Barbara replied.

"What about Poston, then? "

"I've no idea where he is."

"Then let's not bother about him. Let's investigate this for ourselves."

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Barbara nodded her agreement. "All right," she said, "provided you don't forget to play the third set later."

The two girls left the tennis court, crossed the smooth green lawn and went into the house. Making their way quickly along the passage, they came to the narrow winding staircase which they knew led up to the turret room. When they reached the door at the top, they found that it was locked, but this presented no difficulty, because the key was hanging on a hook nearby. And as soon as Alison turned the key in the lock, the door swung inwards.

Their surprise at seeing Tiger and Snort was equalled by the subs.' joy that their signal had so soon produced the result for which they had hoped.

Breathlessly the two boys poured out the story of their adventures since they had last seen the girls. Alison and Barbara were understandably subdued when the full extent of their guardians' villainy had been unfolded to them.

"So Aunt Sybil and Uncle Ralph are crooks," Barbara whispered. "How awful."

But Kenton reminded her how unpleasant their guardians had always been to them.

"Yes, that's true," agreed Alison. "And we'd begun to think there was something wrong with them. But, well—" She broke off with a shrug of her shoulders more eloquent than words.

"The big problem at the moment," Ransome broke in, tactfully changing the subject, "is how we're going to get out of this place without being seen. That's most important."

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Alison looked at her sister. "Yes," she said resolutely, "we must do all we can to help Tiger and Snort escape—and tell the police about Aunt Sybil and Uncle Ralph. Because they'll be traitors if they sell the submarine to another country—and I hate traitors!"

"Well said, Alison," Kenton cried admiringly. "But don't forget Poston's probably in the plot as well; we mustn't be seen by him, either."

"No," Alison nodded. She thought for a moment, then went on. "You'll have to wait here until to-night—when everyone's asleep—before you get away."

"That means midnight at the earliest," Ransome said. "Even then I think we ought to go down by the passage from your uncle's study to the railway tunnel. It'll be much safer than going out by the front door and through the garden."

"I believe you're right, Tiger," Kenton agreed. "We can't afford a slip-up—not now. If we're seen leaving the house, anything may happen. Horncross might sail the *Magician* before we could bring the police through to Rackstone Cove."

"That's all very well," commented Barbara, "but what about us?" She was agog to play a part in the adventure.

"Yes," echoed her sister. "You can't leave us out of it."

Ransome frowned. "After you've unlocked the door of this place to-night, when the coast is clear," he said, "and shown us the way to the study, you must stay in Mullion Hall and act as if nothing had happened."

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Barbara made a wry face. "It would be awfully hard to be polite to Aunt Sybil and Uncle Ralph now that we know what they really are," she demurred.

Kenton saw her point. "Yes," he agreed. "It wouldn't be fair to ask either of you to do that." He turned to his friend. "Suppose Horncross became suspicious of them, Tiger," he went on. "If he thought they'd helped us to escape, why, he might do anything to them."

"You've got something there, Snort." Ransome looked at the girls. "There's only one answer," he decided. "You'll have to come with us, both of you."

Barbara threw her arms round the astonished sub-lieutenant's neck. "How perfectly thrilling!" she cried.

Alison echoed her response. "We'd simply love to come with you," she said.

So they settled that after everyone in Mullion Hall had gone to bed that night and would be asleep, Alison and Barbara should creep from their beds up the stairs to the turret room and release Tiger and Snort. All four would then go down to the study and out by way of the secret passage down to the railway tunnel. From there they would walk through to St. Mawgen and report the whole affair to the police. Until then the two subs. would have to remain in the turret room; for another twelve hours or more they would have to be very patient.

They had completed these plans when the lunch gong boomed faintly from the depths of Mullion Hall and called Alison and Barbara away. Locking the door behind them, and carefully replacing the key on

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the peg outside, the girls tip-toed with beating hearts down the circular stairs and walked along to the dining-room.

Tiger and Snort were left to settle themselves as comfortably as they could until midnight; but it was difficult not to envy the girls the meal they must be enjoying. All they would get, when Poston decided to make the journey up to the turret room, would be a fresh jug of water and a loaf of bread. They had not had anything more appetising for the last three days, so that they were beginning to feel very hungry. They might argue that it wouldn't be very long now before they escaped: all the same, midnight seemed a very long time away.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Escape

IT HAPPENED, however, that Ransome and Kenton did not have quite so long to wait as they expected.

As the minutes crept slowly by, the shaft of light that filtered through the little window faded until the turret room was shrouded in gloom. When the distant chimes of the church clock in St. Mawgen told the prisoners that it was seven o'clock, Snort sniffed impatiently.

"Another five hours to kill," he complained. "I can't wait to get cracking!"

Ransome would have replied in the same strain had he not heard the sound of the key turning in the lock of the door to their "cell."

They expected it to be Poston with their evening supply of bread and water, and started up in surprise when they saw Alison and Barbara.

"But why have you come so early?" they asked.

"Because the coast is clear now," Alison answered. "Aunt Sybil and Uncle Ralph have gone out to dinner and the kitchen staff have been given the evening off."

"Does that include Poston?" Kenton promptly enquired.

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"It didn't," Barbara smiled, "but it does now. We told him he could leave us a cold supper and go."

"Which he was very glad to do," Alison added. "He's with his cronies in the St. Mawgen Arms now."

Ransome beamed at them. "Good girls," he said admiringly. "Very good, both of you. So now, apart from us, the house is empty?"

"Absolutely," Alison affirmed.

"Then there's no reason why we shouldn't go this minute, Snort," said Ransome. "We'll be in St. Mawgen by eight."

"We can walk out by the front door and the front gate!" chuckled Kenton.

Ransome shook his head. "Perhaps—but there's always a chance we might be seen by one of the gang on our way down to the village."

"That may be true," argued Barbara, "but even if we go through the tunnel we may run into somebody in the village before we reach the police station."

"H'm." Ransome considered the problem. "It's vital that Horncross should be kept in the dark until the police nab him," he continued after a pause. "On the other hand, if we stick to our original plan and leave this room later tonight, something important may happen in the meantime—and we'll kick ourselves for being number-one sized idiots for not having gone now."

They were all silent for a moment digesting this argument.

"I know," Alison said at last. "Let's go down through the tunnel now and wait there until it's safe for us to come out into the village."

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"By Jove, yes," Kenton said eagerly. "That's the idea. It'll give us time for another prowling round the shipyard—to check whether the *Magician* is still there."

"Both *Magicians*," Ransome reminded him. "Don't forget we haven't solved the mystery of the second one yet."

"We might even find three this time," was Kenton's amused comment.

Ransome laughed. "And pigs might fly, Snort," he said. "All the same, I think you're right. We ought to be able to tell the police whether both submarines are still there."

"Then let's leave now, Tiger. Alison and Barbara can go down to the study and see if it's all clear for us to follow."

"We will," answered Alison, adding, "and if it is, I'll whistle like this." She rounded her lips and produced a quavering version of the first bars of *Rule Britannia*.

Ransome rubbed his hands together: "First class, Alison!"

She brought her hand from behind her back. "You'll need this for when you come downstairs," she said, and thrust a torch into Tiger's hand.

When the girls had left, Ransome began to worry over his decision. "I only hope we're doing the right thing by the girls," he said. "It's all very well for *us* to get in a jam, Snort, but I don't like involving them in one."

Kenton understood his friend's scruples. "Of course we don't want to involve them, Tiger," he cried. "But

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we can't leave them in the house. You must see that. If Horncross realised that they'd released us, who knows what he might do to them? "

Ransome argued no further because at that moment they heard a tenuous whistle in the distance and recognised the first notes of *Rule Britannia*. Kenton at once grasped Ransome by the arm and led the way out of the turret and down the dusty stone steps.

Reaching the passage at the bottom, they started walking quietly towards Horncross's study. The sound of a grandfather clock striking the half-hour made Kenton jump; and as it died away he collided with the suit of armour that stood outside the study door. It toppled over and clanged on the floor, the noise reverberating through the house.

For a few moments they both stood stock still, hardly daring to breathe, and praying that there was really no one in the house to hear. Then Alison's face emerged from the study.

"What on earth—? " she began.

A shame-faced Kenton put his finger to his lips and pointed at the debris that lay at his feet. Then he bent down and began reassembling the armour.

Ransome went ahead and joined the girls in the study, and suddenly remembered that he did not know how to open the door of the secret passage from that side. He ran his fingers over the books on the shelves in the hope of finding a handle or a knob and was still at this task when Kenton rejoined him, to help in the search. Barbara gave a hand, too, whilst Alison went outside to keep a watch in the passage.

Kenton soon located a section of the shelves which

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was the right size for a door. Ransome then decided that the only way they would be able to open it was to remove all the books on both sides in the hope that the catch was hidden behind one of them.

The three of them, Barbara, Ransome and Kenton, each chose a shelf and started to do this; but they were only half way through the task when Barbara discovered that one of her books would not come out.

She pointed this out to Tiger.

Ransome tried it. "By jove!" he said, "it's a dummy. This must be what we're looking for."

Asking Barbara to stand aside, he tried pushing it hard. And to the delight of them all, the concealed door creaked open and they felt the cold, dank air of the secret passage blowing in their faces.

Their joy was, however, short-lived. Suddenly they were thunder-struck to hear a whistle—not this time the *Rule Britannia* signal that the way was clear—but the tune that Alison had agreed to use if she thought someone was coming.

In a trice Ransome was across the room to the door where he seized Alison and, despite her surprised protests, bundled her into the secret passage. Kenton had already persuaded Barbara to join him in the safety of its dark recesses; then, together, the subs. put their shoulders to the moving portion of the bookshelves and pushed it back into place.

"Phew! That's a relief," Ransome said when it was closed. Mopping his brow, he added: "D'you think we were through in time, Snort?"

"I didn't see anyone," gasped his friend.

Alison's reaction was very different. "What I want

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"I know," she said innocently, "is why you boys have taken leave of your senses. Why all the fuss? 'Why did we have to get in here so quickly all of a sudden?'"

Her questions rendered Ransome nearly speechless. "Are you girls plumb crazy?" he asked.

Before Alison and Barbara could retort to this, Kenton explained. "Whoever it was coming along the passage might have nabbed us," he said.

Alison's brown eyes grew round. "Somebody coming along the passage?" she asked incredulously. "Who was coming?"

It was Ransome's turn to be baffled. "What d'you mean?" he asked. "You heard somebody coming, Alison."

"I did, Tiger? Who said so?"

Kenton ran his fingers through his hair. "You warned us someone was coming. You whistled!"

There was a sudden silence. Then Alison answered in a very small voice. "Oh, so I did. I quite forgot."

"You forgot what?" demanded Tiger. "D'you mean there was nobody coming after all?"

"Nobody," replied Alison. "I just whistled because I saw you open the secret door and I was so happy!"

"Because you were happy!" Kenton echoed hollowly. "Oh, my aunt! What a girl!"

Barbara came to her sister's defence. "Well, what's wrong?" she demanded. "Why shouldn't Alison whistle if she feels happy?"

Ransome raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. "It's no good arguing with you," he said wearily. "It doesn't matter to you if we've had the fright of our lives."

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"Exactly," commented Kenton grimly. "I wish we'd left them both behind."

At this Alison was very contrite. "Oh, don't say that, Snort," she pleaded. "I'm frightfully sorry, really. I just didn't think, and I won't do it again."

"Well," Ransome answered grudgingly, "shall we forgive her this time, Snort?"

Kenton pretended to consider the point. "Very well," he said at last, "you're forgiven, Alison."

"And I promise not to be a nuisance again," she replied contritely.

Tiger smiled at her. "Then



that's that!" he concluded briskly. "Now let's go."

Once more in agreement, the quartet set off down

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the steps to the railway tunnel. Ransome, armed with a torch, led the way. Alison and Barbara followed, with Snort bringing up the rear. He, too, had a torch now, so that there was one in front and one behind to guide them. When Tiger's beam glistened on the slime that dripped down the walls of the passage, the sight made Barbara shudder, and she clutched her sister's hand firmly as they filed down through the eerie silence.

Presently Snort whispered, "There's not far to go now."

Ransome reacted at once. "No talking, Snort. There may be someone about. Sounds carry a long way in a place like this."

They reached the foot of the stone steps and found themselves treading on hard earth. Soon the railway tunnel was only twenty yards ahead, and Ransome called a halt.

"Now, Alison," he whispered, "Snort and I are going to leave you and Barbara here while we visit the shipyard."

"But suppose we hear somebody coming down the steps while you're away. What do we do then?"

"Nip out into the railway tunnel," Ransome answered, "until he's out of this passage."

"And suppose we hear somebody coming the other way—from the tunnel into this passage?"

"You'll just have to scam like greased lightning up the steps and out through the study until it's all clear again."

Alison was not at all sure that she and her sister would be able to follow this advice as readily as Tiger

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gave it, but she did not want to show her doubts; so she asked, "How long will you boys be away?"

"Not much more than an hour," Ransome estimated. "I tell you what. You've a watch, Alison?"

"Yes, Tiger," she replied. "It's five to eight now."

"Then if we're not back by half past nine—no, make it ten—you'll know something has happened to us."

"That's a cheerful thought," remarked Alison.

"It's only to be on the safe side," Ransome assured her.

"Well, if that happens, what do we do?" Barbara queried.

"Make your way out of the tunnel," Tiger explained, "and go to the police. Tell them everything—about us, the submarine, and the Horncrosses. Ask the police to contact the Admiralty and leave the rest to them. They'll get cracking soon enough when they know where the *Magician* is."

They all wished each other good luck and the two sub-lieutenants walked away out of the passage into the railway tunnel.

As soon as they had gone Alison moved closer to her sister. "Tiger and Snort are really brave, aren't they!" she breathed admiringly.

"Rather," Barbara agreed. "Isn't it jolly exciting?" she added.

Ransome and Kenton reached the mouth of the tunnel at its seaward end without incident. There they flattened themselves against the side wall and looked out at the shipyard. There was no freight train there this time, and the place seemed deserted. They could

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not hear a sound except for the sea washing against the jetty and on the beach. The Nissen hut, which on their last visit had been lit up and full of men singing, was dark and silent.

As he looked carefully around, Ransome thought the coast was all too clear for safety. Where, he whispered to his companion, were the men they had heard last time?

Kenton suggested that they had gone into St. Mawgen for a night's amusement, but Ransome shook his head.

"Then I hope they haven't gone for good, taking the two *Magicians* with them," Kenton answered.

"We'll soon check that by going down to the jetty," Ransome replied.

Their fears that they might be too late to trace Horncross were soon proved groundless. Approaching the jetty by way of a gap between two small store-houses, they heard voices, and a moment later they could make out through the darkness a group of people. Another moment and they could distinguish the shape of the *Magician*. Several men were working on her narrow casing, though it was impossible to see what they were doing. A tug with a squat fannel and high sloping bows was berthed outboard of the submarine.

They peered around for the other submarine, the second *Magician*, but could not see her.

Then they heard the familiar voice of Horncross. "All right, men, that's the lot. You can knock off now, but I want you back here before nine o'clock."

Kenton nudged his companion. "So he didn't go

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out to dinner after all," he whispered.

"You there, Trenaman?" Horncross queried as his men dispersed.

"Aye, guv'nor," came the answer.

"Sybil?"

Ransome and Kenton heard a woman answer.

Horncross went on: "We'll take her out at nine, Trenaman. Lady Horncross and myself will be coming along with you."

Trenaman spat noisily. "I'm only the skipper o' this tug: you're the boss," he said. "But it b'ain't a very comfortable ship for a lady to spend a night in."

"I can put up with it," Lady Sybil retorted. "We can't very well go in the *Magician*."

"I want you to come along to the office now, Trenaman," Horncross ordered. "I'll show you where we're meeting the Paravianian destroyer in the morning. We're coming out with you," he added lightly, "because we want to make sure our two million dollars are safely delivered."

The sound of their voices grew faint as Horncross, with his wife and the skipper of the tug, left the jetty for one of the Nissen huts.

For Ransome and Kenton the puzzle was why there had been no mention of the second submarine. But Tiger soon decided: "We can't bother about her now, Snort. We've got to do something about this one."

"But what?" Kenton answered grimly. "She'll be gone before we can get back through the tunnel and persuade the police to do something about it."

"Let me think, Snort," was Tiger's earnest reply. "Let me think."

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Once the *Magician* had been turned over to the Paravianian destroyer, there would be nothing anyone could do, since she would be protected by the Paravianian flag. The Navy would not risk creating an international incident; and by the time the Foreign Office had settled matters through the usual diplomatic channels, Paravania would have found out all she wanted to know about the secret Rockingham reactor. So at all costs *something* had to be done to thwart Horncross's scheme. But what? The more Ransome and Kenton racked their brains, the more difficult the solution appeared to be.

Inside one of the Nissen huts, Sir Ralph and Lady Horncross stood beside Trenaman studying a large chart which was spread on a trestle table. Trenaman stabbed at it with a dirty finger.

"Aye, guv'nor," he declared, "we'll have no difficulty makin' that position by seven tomorrow. In this weather we'll tow the sub. at more'n five knots."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Horncross answered. "Nothing must go wrong at this stage."

Trenaman rolled up the chart. "I ain't 'eard a better weather forecast this side o' Michaelmas," he said. He tucked the chart under his arm. "What do we do when we've turned over the sub?"

"Come back here after nightfall."

"How about Alison and Barbara?" Lady Sybil asked. "They'll wonder what's happened to us."

"D'you suppose I'd forget such an elementary precaution?" was Horncross's arrogant reply.

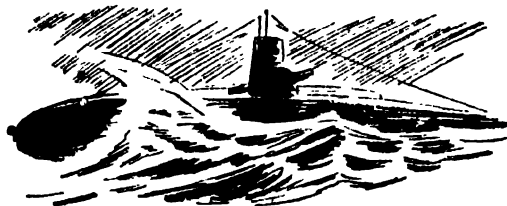
"But if we don't show up, they may go to the police," his wife protested.

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Horncross shook his head. "At breakfast tomorrow," he said, "Wiggs will inform the girls that we telephoned late tonight and told him we'd decided to sleep at the house where we're supposed to be dining, and that we shall not be returning until tomorrow evening."

As Trenaman kicked the door of the hut open, allowing a gust of chill sea air to blow in, Lady Sybil suddenly said, "I suppose we can trust Wiggs?"

Horncross laughed cynically. "Trust Wiggs—after five years' loyal service to us?" he said. "My dear, don't be absurd."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tiger and Snort Disappear

AT THE JETTY in the Rackstone Cove shipyard the *Magician* was ready to sail. Horncross's tug—her name was *Baron*—was now lying alongside the submarine, and on the instructions of Skipper Trenaman, two men were making a last minute check of the hawsers which secured the two vessels together. When this was finished they jumped from the *Magician's* casing to the *Baron's* deck and reported to Trenaman.

Swearing volubly as he tripped over a coil of rope in the darkness, the skipper climbed the ladder to his bridge to join Sir Ralph and Lady Horncross.

"All correct, guv'nor," he reported. "Do we slip?"

Horncross nodded. "Right, Skipper," he answered with a deep sigh of satisfaction. "Away we go." Then with his wife, he leaned over the bridge-rail and stared through the darkness at the submarine.

Trenaman cupped his hand to his mouth. "Let 'er go," he bellowed, first forward and then aft.

The clatter of wires on the steel casing of the *Magician* told him that the slip ropes which had secured the submarine to the jetty were being hauled inboard. Reports of "All gone forward!" and "All

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gone aft! " told him when the job was done.

" Wheel 'ard a-port! " Trenaman ordered.

The helmsman, a bulky figure dimly visible in the glow from the compass in the wheelhouse amidships, chanted: "'Ard a-port," as he turned the wheel through his horny hands.

" 'Alf astern! " ordered Trenaman.

" 'Alf astern," came the response as the telegraph clanged. Almost immediately the tug's diesel engines began to thud and her deck to vibrate in sympathy beneath the feet of those who stood on the bridge. The *Baron*, with the *Magician* secured alongside, started to move slowly away from the jetty. Then her bows swung round until both vessels were pointing out of the cove towards the open sea.

As they steamed away from the high cliffs which surrounded the shipyard, Lady Sybil spoke from her husband's side. " Do we keep the *Magician* alongside like this all night? "

Trenaman supplied the answer. " No, ma'am," he said. " As soon as we're clear o' this cove, we drops 'er astern and tows 'er on the end o' two 'undred fathom o' wire."

Horncross pointed at two men standing on the *Magician's* casing. " How about them? " he queried. " Do they stay with her? "

" No, guv'nor " Trenaman answered. " Afore we drops 'er astern, they comes aboard us. There ain't goin' to be nobody left aboard the sub."

Lady Sybil was surprised to hear this. " But," she began, " suppose—"

Trenaman, who brooked no interference with his

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task, cut her short: "You leave everything to me, ma'am," he said gruffly. "I ain't been a tug skipper for twenty years for nothin. You'd best to go down to the cabin," he added. "It's chilly up 'ere o' nights."

Horncross agreed. "Yes, Sybil, there's nothing for us to do now. We'd best get some sleep."

"I'll be lettin' yer know as soon as the *Magician's* towin' astern," Trenaman said.

"Thanks," Horncross answered, leading the way down the bridge ladder while his wife followed him. As they reached the light and warmth of the cabin the tug began to pitch slightly into the swell that swept round the western headland of Rackstone Cove.

A few minutes later, when the heights of Hangman's Hill were no longer visible astern, Trenaman turned aft and again cupped his hands to his mouth. "Mr. Mate!" he bawled. He had to repeat the call before an answer came back to him out of the darkness below.

"We'll be shifting the sub. astern now," Trenaman ordered.

* * *

Inside the passage up to Mullion Hall, some yards from the railway tunnel, Alison and Barbara were awaiting the return of Tiger and Snort. Not for the first time that night, the elder girl looked at the luminous dial of her wrist-watch.

"It's half-past ten," she said. "Tiger and Snort ought to have been back long ago. Something must have happened to them."

Barbara shared her sister's anxiety. "It was awfully risky of them to go and look at the shipyard again," she said.

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"Well, we know what to do," Alison went on. "We're not waiting here any longer. We're going into the tunnel and along to the village to tell everything to the police—like Tiger said."

"Everything?" Barbara drew an anxious breath. "Even about Uncle Ralph and Aunt Sybil—that they're crooks?" she whispered.

Alison was determined. "Yes," she said. "We must."

Barbara's hand touched the slimy wall of their hiding place. "I shall be glad to get out of this nasty hole," she confessed.

Cupping her hand over the lens to shade it, Alison switched on her torch and, by its light, led her sister along the passage. In the railway tunnel she put a restraining hand on Barbara's arm and whispered. "Listen a moment—in case someone's coming."

She hoped in her heart to hear footsteps that would prove to be Tiger and Snort returning from the cove, but no sound reached her ears out of the gloom that surrounded them.

"Nothing," Barbara whispered back.

"Then come along," her sister answered, leading the way in the direction of the village.

They had to tread carefully to avoid tripping over the rails and sleepers, so that it was a good half-hour before they arrived at the mouth of the tunnel. Their relief on reaching the greater safety of the cutting, to see the night sky above their heads, and to breathe fresh air after the dank atmosphere of the tunnel, was very great. They were glad to clamber up the side of the cutting, and climb the wire fence at the top. Then

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they ran rather than walked along the road leading past the St. Mawgen hotel. Breathless, but determined, they hurried up the main street, between two rows of darkened shops and houses, until they came to the police station. This was no more than a cottage in which lived St. Mawgen's only policeman.

On reaching the door, Alison seized the knocker and banged it violently.

After a brief pause, a tousled head appeared at the window on the floor above. "Now then, now then, what's all this?" demanded the sleepy voice of Constable Huggins.

Barbara looked up. "Please come down quickly and let us in," she cried.

"Why, what be 'appening?" grumbled Huggins. "Can't it wait until morning? Wakin' up decent folk in the middle o' the night! 'Oo may you be, anyway?"

Alison stamped an impatient foot. Precious seconds were ticking away. "It's about the missing submarine—the *Magician*," she cried.

"*Magician*?" Huggins sounded incredulous. "*Magician*?" he repeated. "'An wot wotld you young ladies be knowin' about 'er?"

"That's what we want to tell you, Constable," Barbara pleaded, "if only you'll come down and let us in—*please*."

It took rather more than five minutes of similar conversation before Alison and Barbara finally persuaded Huggins to leave his bedroom and admit them to the parlour of his cottage.

Buttoning up the jacket of his uniform and telling the girls to sit down, the constable drew a chair up to

Tiger and Snort Disappear

a plain deal table for himself. Then, before he would allow them to begin, he had to find his notebook and sharpen a pencil: but at last he was ready to hear their story, by which time both Alison and Barbara were almost speechless with impatience.

At first Huggins showed no great interest in their tale, but his attitude changed to one of earnest concentration when Alison disclosed that the experimental submarine, for which the whole of Britain was searching, was lying no farther from St. Mawgen than Rackstone Cove. His pencil flew over the pages of his notebook as he took it all down, though he had difficulty in believing that it was true. Why, he'd been a constable for nearly ten years now and such things had never happened in St. Mawgen before. Surely such crookery couldn't have been going on right under his nose without him knowing anything about it! Though of course, he'd had no reason to visit the old shipyard because it was disused and derelict.

Alison and Barbara's accusations against their guardians were even more difficult for him to believe. "But Sir Ralph," he objected, "'e be squire o' St. Mawgen these twenty years. An' you be 'is nieces, you says. 'Tis 'ard to credit 'e b'ain't an 'onest man."

"You must believe us," Alison added. "We wouldn't disturb you at this time of night if it wasn't."

Huggins scratched his head with the end of his pencil. "Maybe not," he said, "but these two sub-lieutenants; you says they've disappeared after nosin' around the old shipyard. Leastways, they ain't come back yet?"

"That's right," Alison nodded.

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"H'm." Huggins gave a non-committal grunt and studied his notes for several moments in silence, trying to make up his mind what he should do. Fortunately he reached a decision before the girls' impatience was finally exhausted.

"All right," he announced. "I'll be ringin' Truro and makin' a report to Superintendent."

"What good will that do?" Barbara asked.

"There be only me in St. Mawgen, miss," Huggins replied. "There b'ain't another constable this side o' Truro. An' if what you says be true, we'll need at least a dozen men,"

"But the Admiralty—you'll ring them, too?" Alison broke in.

Huggins answered: "Don't you be worryin' about the Admiralty, miss. Superintendent'll be scein' that everybody as should knows all you've been tellin' me."

"Then please ring Truro quickly before anything terrible happens to Tiger and Snort—I mean our friends," Barbara urged.

A smile crossed Huggins' stolid countenance. "You've no cause to be worryin' about Mr. Ransome and Mr. Kenton," he said. "I was in the Navy meself during the war, and young orficers knows 'ow to take care o' themselves. Navy teaches 'em that."

"I hope you're right about that, Constable," Alison said, "because if not—" She did not put her fears into words, but broke off and asked, "Can we wait until you've telephoned?"

Huggins levered himself out of his chair and shook his head. "No, miss," he said. "If wot you says about Sir Ralph and 'is Lady be true, you'd best be getting

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back to Mullion 'All—and tuck yerselves up in bed as quick as you can. If your uncle finds as you ain't there, maybe 'e'll suspect summat an' cut up rough. We don't want that to 'appen, do we? "

Alison looked questioningly at her sister. Were they to accept the constable's advice?

Barbara thought for a moment before she gave her reluctant consent. "Yes," she said. "I think that's right. "I shan't sleep, though—not until I know whether the boys are safe."

"Nor shall I," Alison responded, "but come on."

"That's the ticket," said Huggins as he led the girls to the door. "I expects an inspector'll be up at Mullion 'all afore very long, a-makin' enquiries."

When the girls had said goodnight, he watched them go down the street towards the road which led up to Mullion Hall. He waited until they had turned the corner and were out of sight before going back indoors.

Were they pulling his leg, he wondered? A pretty fool he'd be if he rang Truro and an inspector and a dozen men came over to St. Mawgen to find it was all a mare's nest. Still, he couldn't very well do nothing, not when the girls had said they knew where the missing submarine was hidden, and he didn't fancy going through that old railway tunnel to have a look in the shipyard—not by himself at that time of night, he didn't, not if a gang of crooks was involved. Yes, he would have to ring Truro.

Huggins would not admit, even to himself, that he was afraid of the ghost of Black Jack whom folks said was seen most nights upon Hangman's Hill.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Stowaways

TIGER RANSOME and Snort Kenton stood on the jetty in Rackstone Cove, watching the *Magician*, with the tug *Baron* secured outside her. The two subs. were racking their brains for an effective way of forestalling Horncross's plan to sell the submarine to Paravania. They knew that they had only half an hour before she left for the rendezvous with the Paravanian destroyer; once gone she would be lost for ever.

It was not very long before Tiger decided that there was only one possible thing that they could do in the circumstances; indeed, he said, it was their duty as naval officers to do it, regardless of the risk to themselves which it involved. They must stow away on board the *Magician*.

Snort immediately nodded his agreement; he could conceive no alternative, nor did he bother his head, or his friend, by asking what they would be able to do once they were on board. There was no time for argument. It was enough for him, as it was for Tiger, that they should be on board the *Magician*, where they might be able to do something to stop Horncross

Stowaways

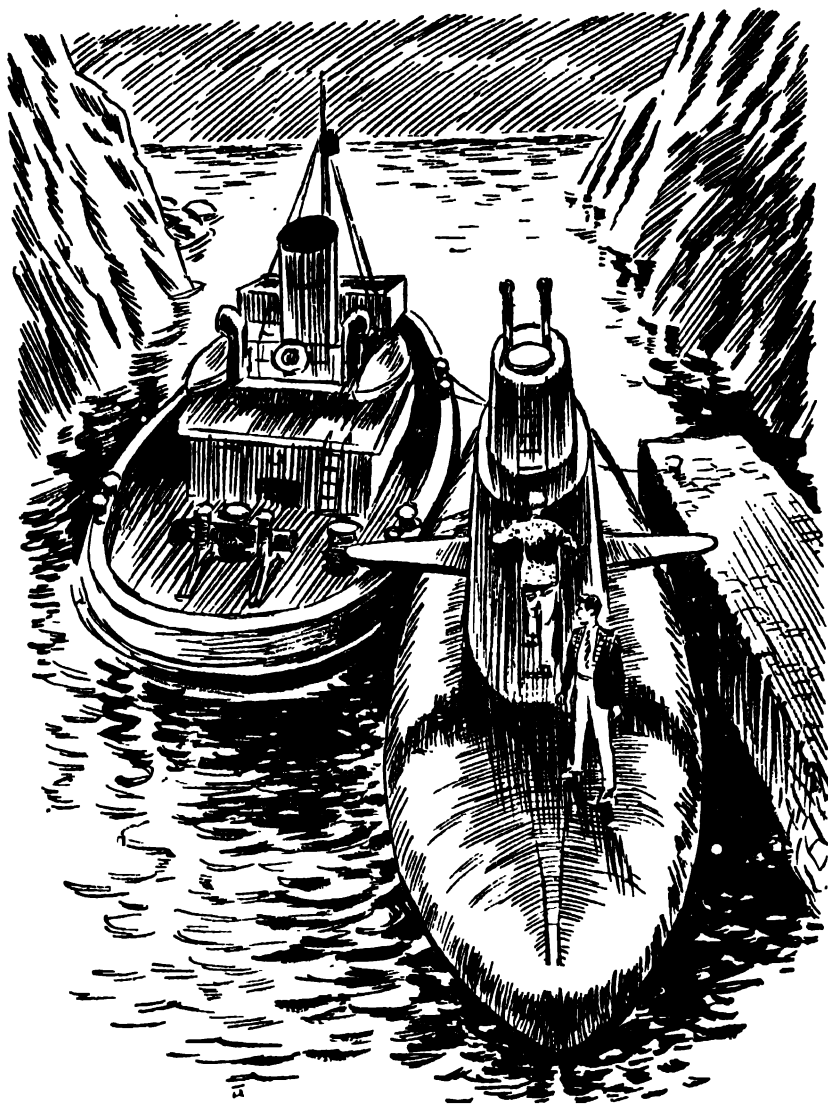
carrying out his plan, rather than be left behind where they could do nothing.

There was, however, at the back of their minds the arrangement they had made with the girls: when Tiger and Snort failed to rejoin them in the secret passage off the railway tunnel, Alison and Barbara would make their way into St. Mawgen and tell the whole story to the police. And as soon as that reached London, all the resources of the C.I.D., of M.I.5, of the Navy and the Air Force would surely be mobilised to recover the *Magician*.

So, seizing their opportunity whilst Horncross's gang were up in the Nissen huts, and Horncross himself, with Lady Sybil, was studying the chart with the *Baron's* skipper, they emerged from their hiding place between the two storehouses, and very cautiously made their way across the jetty. A moment later they were over the gangplank and, unobserved, down on the submarine's casing. They had only to locate an open hatch through which to go below. Leaving Kenton to keep a look-out, Ransome climbed the conning-tower.

As was to be expected, he found there a hatch which must lead down to the control room. More important, he had no difficulty in opening it. The inside of the submarine was in darkness, welcome proof that it contained no crew. He called quietly to Kenton to join him. The pair of them dropped through the hatch, pulling it shut and securing it after them, then down the ladder inside the conning tower.

The beam of Ransome's torch showed a maze of pipes, electric leads, numerous dials and gauges and



Ransome climbed the conning-tower.

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many hand wheels and switches. As final evidence that they were, indeed, within the *Magician's* control room, the centre of the compartment was filled with the massive cylindrical stalks of two periscopes.

For the moment they could hear nothing except the sea lapping gently against the outside of the vessel. Within there was nothing but an eerie silence. Then the clump of boots and the rattle of wires on the casing told them that the gang had returned and that the submarine was about to slip from her berth.

Ransome looked at his friend. "Well, Snort," he remarked, "this is it. There's no turning back now. But if we should get into a jam—because I'm afraid that's possible—very possible—then it'll be my fault. I want you to know I'm sorry; it was my idea that we should stow away on board like this, and it may prove to be the most foolish thing I've ever done.

Kenton responded with a vigorous shake of his head. "Nonsense, Tiger!" he cried. "What else could we do? This is the right thing—the only possible thing, and I'm in it just as much as you are—up to the neck. I agreed with your idea, of my own free will, didn't I? So stop worrying."

The noises over their heads had now ceased, and the sound of the tug's propellers and the rush of water past the submarine's saddle tanks told them that both the *Baron* and the *Magician* were under way. Their voyage to the rendezvous with the Paravianian destroyer had begun. So they walked through the bulkhead forward of the control room and made themselves comfortable in the submarine's wardroom. They had all night in front of them in which to decide what they

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should do when the time came for Horncross to complete his traitorous deal.

As Ransome put it: "There's no doubt about it, Snort, We've got to stop the *Magician* falling into the hands of Paravania. It's ten o'clock now. We must think of a way to spike Horncross's guns within the next eight hours or we've had it—and Britain too, if it comes to that."

Kenton smoothed his rumpled black hair. "Well," he said, "I hope Alison and Barbara don't let us down. Once the Admiralty gets the news, they'll move fast enough. And when they don't find the *Magician* in Rackstone Cove, they'll have aircraft up searching for us—and ships out from Plymouth."

"Yep," Ransome agreed. "But the chances of their finding us before seven o'clock are about nix. After that—" He finished with an expressive shrug of his shoulders.

"You mean once the tow is handed over to the Paravanians," answered Kenton, "it'll be difficult for our ships to do anything without creating an international incident?"

Ransome looked glum. "That's it, I'm afraid, Snort," he said.

"I suppose it's impossible for us to slip the tow before we get there?"

Ransome's expression changed to a grin. "Oh, Snort!" he cried, "where's your seamanship? The slip will be in the tug, not this submarine. And cutting the wire is out of the question—we'd need an oxy-acetylene burner, supposing we knew how to work such a thing."

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“And I suppose the tug would notice they’d lost the tow, anyway,” Snort replied. “And she’d come charging back, to take this boat in tow again. Yes, it’s not a very good idea, but I don’t expect to think of a better one.”

“Well,” responded Tiger dryly, “I might—if you’ll stop nattering.”

Constable Huggins' telephone message to the superintendent at Truro had the proper result. The available facts were immediately passed on to the Admiralty while an inspector named Simms was summoned and provided with a patrol of a dozen men under a sergeant.

Within minutes, Inspector Simms had telephoned instructions to Constable Huggins that he was to expect them in less than an hour. By the time Simms had rung off, a convoy of police-cars was ready to carry him and his men through the streets of Truro and out on to the road that led to the coast and St. Mawgen.

When the party reached the village, they stopped to pick up Constable Huggins, who directed them to the railway cutting. There the police left their cars and swarmed down on to the track. Pausing only to station a couple of constables at the entrance to the tunnel, Simms led the rest of them through it. He set a good pace so that soon they emerged from the other end.

The shipyard was silent and in darkness. It would have appeared deserted but for a faint light showing from a curtained window of one of the Nissen huts. That suggested the presence of a human being.

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Instructing the sergeant to watch the hut, in case anyone tried to leave it, Simms led his men down to the jetty. He was considerably disappointed at not finding the *Magician* there, but he was not discouraged. There was plenty of evidence to show that the shipyard was not derelict as it was reputed to be; and that was ample justification for making further enquiries, he told Constable Huggins, when that worthy began to mutter something about young girls as pulled an honest copper's legs.

Returning to the Nissen hut, Simms did not bother to knock; he pushed the door open and strode inside. Two men were half asleep by the stove. Both wore greasy dungarees. At the unexpected interruption they jumped up with a start, but faced with a strong force of police, realised that they were in no position to offer resistance or to attempt an escape.

"All right, lads," Simms said. "I'm not looking for trouble, but I want you to answer a few questions."

The two men glowered sullenly at him, and at first proved very unwilling to say anything. But Simms pointed out that he knew that they were only small-time crooks, that he was after much bigger game. The quicker they spilled the beans, he said, the easier it would be for them when it came to a question of making charges—and a trial.

Hearing this, they admitted that their job had been to drive special freight trains down the abandoned spur and through the tunnel into the cove. The trains started from a siding some ten miles away on the main line where they were loaded with steel, timber, and other supplies for the shipyard. They had realised

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something fishy was going on, but when they had asked questions about it, they had been told to keep their mouths shut. And they had been paid well for doing it, very well. They did not know who employed them; they had never seen him, nor heard his name; they were not interested so long as they received their money.

Simms was not sure whether he believed every detail of their story, but he could not spend all night questioning them. So far he had found no trace of the missing submarine, nor of the young naval officers, Ransome and Kenton. It was therefore time he pursued the other line of enquiry suggested by the tale the two girls had told to Constable Huggins. He had seen enough to know that it was not all moonshine.

Leaving the train driver and fireman in the custody of two of his men, the inspector walked quickly back through the tunnel with the rest of his force. Returning to their cars, they drove up to Mullion Hall. Simms stopped them at the gates and ordered his men out.

"Put a cordon round the house, Sergeant," he ordered. "I don't want anyone to leave. Huggins, you and I are going inside."

The police scattered, and in a couple of minutes the sergeant reported that Mullion Hall was surrounded.

"Right," nodded Inspector Simms. "Come on, Huggins."

They walked up the drive, their feet crunching crisply on the gravel. There was no sign of life from the house; all the windows were dark.

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Arriving at the front porch, Simms rang the bell. When there was no answer, he pressed it again. Since there was still no response, Huggins rapped loudly with the door-knocker.

"Needs thunder to wake some folks," he said.

"If we don't stir someone pretty quick," Simms snapped, "I'm breaking in." He was a forceful, efficient man and at two in the morning he was in no mood to be trifled with.

Fortunately, just when he was about to take violent action, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps inside the house, followed by the noise of bolts being shot back. Then the door opened a little and Poston's face glowered at them through the gap.

"'Ere! wotcher fink yer a' doin'..." he began. Then, remembering his position in the house, he stopped, swallowed hard and "corrected" himself: "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

Simms did not give him an immediate answer. He kicked the door open, pushed Poston aside, and walked into the hall. Then he said, "You can tell Sir Ralph Horncross that Inspector Simms from Truro is here and would like to talk to him."

Poston looked shocked. "At this hour, sir, at two o'clock in the morning?" he protested.

"I don't care tuppence what time it is," was Simms' sharp reply. "I wish to see Sir Ralph Horncross *now*."

A sly glint came into Poston's beady eyes. "That is most unfortunate, sir," he said, "because Sir Ralph is not at home."

But Simms was not satisfied. "Then I'll see Lady Horncross," he retorted.

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"Lady Horncross is not at home either, sir," answered Poston.

Constable Huggins stepped forward. "'Scuse me, Inspector," he said, and thrust his face within an inch of the butler's. "You'd best cut this pompous stuff, Poston," he began.

Before he could finish warning, Simms intervened. "Did you say 'Poston', Constable?" he asked. "So it's 'Wiggs' Poston, is it? I thought I'd seen your face somewhere before. So this is where you've been hiding yourself!"

Drawing himself up to his full height, Poston looked the picture of outraged dignity. "I don't know what you are referring to," he observed.

Simms grabbed him by the shoulder. "I do," he observed. "Truro Assizes—that was the last time we met—and you were in the dock, on a charge of house-breaking—burglary, if you like. The verdict was 'guilty', and the sentence five years' imprisonment, which you spent in Dartmoor. That was it, wasn't it, Wiggs?"

The butler suddenly seemed to shrivel up to half his size. "On' right," he admitted, as Simms released his grip. "It's a fair cop. Wiggs Poston it is. But I served me time on the Moor; you ain't got nuffink on me now."

Inspector Simms looked him steadily between the eyes. "That depends on whether you're going to help me or not," he said.

"I tells yer, the Guv'nor ain't 'ere," protested Poston. "Straight 'e ain't."

"That remains to be seen," Simms said quietly.

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"Suppose we sit down, you and I, Wiggs, and have a little talk."

He shepherded Poston into the sitting room, where Huggins took up his stand by the door. But Poston refused to take a chair.

"Very well, Wiggs," shrugged Simms, "as you will."

Before the inspector could ask his first question, Poston began to protest his innocence. "I don't know nuffink, I tells yer," he cried. "An' when the Guv'nor 'ears as 'ow you've busted into 'is 'house—"

Simms was not perturbed by this outburst. "I'm told that Sir Ralph and his lady went out to dinner," he said smoothly. "Where?"

"I dunno."

"And I don't believe you," Simms persisted. "Come on—who were they dining with?"

"Dunno," Poston scowled.

Constable Huggins intervened. "Then you can tell us why they 'aven't come back," he threatened. "Folks don't stay out till two o'clock of a morning, not in St. Mawgen they don't."

Poston squirmed uncomfortably at this attack, but only muttered once again: "I dunno!"

Simms tried another tack. "When do you expect them back?" he asked.

There was a pause, then: "This evenin'—around eight," Poston admitted grudgingly.

"If you know when they're coming back, you know where they are now," Simms immediately countered.

"I don't."

"You're lying, Wiggs!" This time Simms' words cut through the room like a whiplash.

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A dark flush suffused Poston's flabby cheeks. "Wot me!" he shouted. "Me! You ain't got no right—"

"Listen to me, Wiggs," interjected Inspector Simms, and his voice was very firm. "We know a lot more than you think. I've just come from the old shipyard down at Rackstone Cove. From what I've seen there, someone is going to have to answer some awkward questions—in court. Now, if you want to be in the dock yourself, along with the rest of 'em, that's your affair; but if you want to escape a heavy sentence—" Simms paused meaningly.

Poston remained dumb.

Simms continued: "—you'll answer this question. Where is H.M.S. *Magician*?"

The butler shuffled his feet and stared stubbornly ahead. "I read in the papers as 'ow she was lost . . ." he began. He faltered into silence.

Then, unexpectedly and with greater agility than one would have given him credit for, he made a sudden dash for the french windows at the other side of the room. Before Huggins could stop him, there was a crash of breaking glass and he had leapt through into the garden.

But almost at once Inspector Simms was after him, yelling to his men to catch the errant butler. Before Poston had run much farther than the tennis court, two constables had hurled themselves on him and brought him to the ground. This knocked all the breath out of him.

Simms and Huggins escorted him back into the sitting room where he was dumped on the sofa.

"Now, Wiggs," said Simms, "that was a silly thing

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to do—a very silly thing. An old lag like you ought to know better than to suppose I wouldn't have the house cordoned. However, I'm going to give you one more chance to tell me what I want to know—and to have the benefit of turning Queen's evidence. One chance only, remember."

Poston feebly wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Orl right, Inspector," he groaned, "I'll tell yer wot I knows, so long as I ain't sent up on the Moor again."

"I've given my word on that," Simms nodded. He looked down at the frightened butler. "But this is your last chance, Wiggs."

"Okay," Poston said. "It's a cop. I sees the submarine down in Rackstone Cove yesterday mornin'. But I ain't pinched 'er, Inspector, straight I ain't."

"Nobody's accusing you of that, Wiggs."

At a nod from the inspector, Huggins took a notebook out of his hip pocket, licked a stub of pencil, and waited expectantly to record Poston's tale.

"Now we'll have your story," Simms went on, "the whole story from A to Z—everything you know about this submarine. And I want the truth, Wiggs."

"That's wot I'm telling you," pleaded Poston, who now resembled nothing so much as a punctured balloon. "I'm tellin' you the 'ole truth and nuffink but the truth. . . ."

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An hour later the Duty Commander in the Operations Division at the Admiralty was on the 'phone passing Poston's story to Admiral Dashwood at his London home. He gave him the position to the west

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of the Scillies where the *Magician*, in tow of the *Baron*, should be at first light that morning, and added that the Commander-in-Chief at Plymouth had been informed and that he was ordering a fast frigate to the position. Aircraft were also being sent up to make a search.

Five minutes later the telephone by Professor Rockingham's bedside jangled harshly. Still half asleep, he heard the Third Sea Lord's excited voice.

"You mean you've news of my submarine?" Rockingham stammered, when he could get a word in. He hardly dared to believe that what Dashwood was telling him was true, for fear that it was all a dream.

However, the Third Sea Lord was soon able to set his fears at rest. He told him, moreover, that an Admiralty car would be picking him up very shortly. They were to drive together to Northolt airport, from where a helicopter would carry them out to sea and land them on board the *Venturer*. This was the frigate which had been ordered out of Plymouth to find the *Magician*, and she would have sailed before they could possibly get to the West Country dockyard port.

In a daze, the professor jumped out of bed and hurriedly pulled on his clothes. By the time he was downstairs, the Admiralty car, with the Third Sea Lord inside, was at the door. Dashwood welcomed him as they drove away through the sleeping streets of London towards Northolt.

"We're ready for action, Rockingham," the admiral said, rubbing his hands with satisfaction, "—for any action needed to recover the *Magician* for her rightful owners, the Royal Navy."

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Rockingham, who was still not entirely sure whether he was awake or dreaming, muttered, "It's all most confusing, Admiral, most confusing."

Dashwood repeated the report which he had had from St. Mawgen, via Scotland Yard and the Admiralty, and this time Rockingham was satisfied. How dare ~~dash~~ Horncross—a man who was supposed to be an English gentleman—how dare he steal *his* submarine; worse, perhaps, how dare he make a copy of it so that he could bamboozle Britain into paying a Queen's ransom for her, and still have the real submarine to sell to a foreign power. He had cribbed Rockingham's unique design—even if it was only made of wood and wasn't propelled by his secret nuclear reactor. Why, the man was much more than a thief; he was a traitor to his country, which was a great deal worse.

The professor was so preoccupied with these thoughts that he hardly realised that they had reached the airport. Nor was he fully conscious of following Admiral Dashwood into the waiting helicopter. They were no sooner aboard than the vanes of its big horizontal rotor began to turn, and the machine rose vertically into the air.

They flew steadily for two hours before dawn began to break in the east. Soon the rising sun glinted on the helicopter's fuselage; then her passengers distinguished the jagged coastline of Cornwall fringed by white foam-capped waves breaking on the rocks.

They passed over Land's End and the Scilly Islands. After that there was nothing to be seen ahead but sea and the lonely Bishop's Rock lighthouse.

"If my geography is correct, Admiral," Rocking-

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ham announced, "We are getting near our destination."

For a moment Dashwood did not answer him. His face was pressed to the window, staring hard at something that had caught his eagle eye. Then he touched his companion's arm: "Look, Rockingham, that's our frigate—the *Venturer*."

"The *Venturer*?" repeated the professor, screwing up his eyes until he could distinguish a tiny grey shape on the silvery sea. "But it's impossible for this helicopter to land on her!" he exclaimed. "Quite impossible: she's too small. There wouldn't be room."

"Very true, Rockingham. There isn't room."

At this reply a disquieting thought came into the professor's mind and he sat up sharply: "I trust we're not going to board her by parachute, Admiral!" he said.

Dashwood laughed. "Not unless you want a swim, Rockingham," he replied. "No, it's quite simple—and safe. Just wait and see. You'll be interested, I promise you."

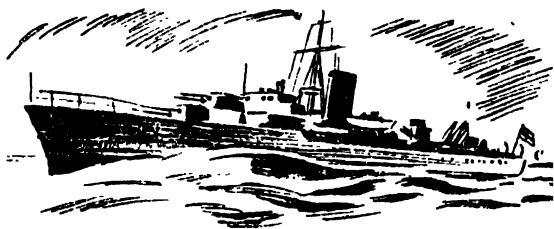
A few minutes later the helicopter began to descend until it was only fifty feet above the *Venturer's* quarter-deck. As it hovered there, Rockingham could almost distinguish the faces of her crew.

Then Dashwood explained what they had to do to board the frigate, which did not make the professor feel at all happy. He felt even less secure when the second pilot of the machine strapped a leather harness round his body, opened a door and invited him to step out into space. However, when he hesitated, Dashwood gave him a sharp push that left him no alternative. He

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found himself swinging on a fine but strong wire below the helicopter from which he was being lowered rapidly towards the frigate. And in next to no time, certainly before he could recover from his alarm at the whole proceedings, he felt his feet touch the frigate's deck.

His relief, as a couple of sailors removed his harness, was so great that when, a few moments later, Dashwood joined him by the same means, he could only look up at the departing helicopter and mutter: "Most extraordinary. Most extraordinary. . . ."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aboard the Venturer

As soon as Admiral Dashwood and the Professor were free of the harness by which they had been lowered from the hovering helicopter, the *Venturer's* first lieutenant led them forward from the quarterdeck up to the bridge where Captain Charles Hawke, D.S.O., R.N., who was in command of the frigate, received them. The Third Sea Lord knew him already; the two officers had served together during the Korean war, when Dashwood had commanded a cruiser with Hawke as his executive officer. Dashwood introduced Rockingham. But this courtesy was no more than a brief formality; all three men had a sterner matter to occupy them.

Captain Hawke lost no time in showing the admiral and the professor the situation on the chart. Dashwood studied it with professional interest. Rockingham, however, could not do much more than peer at it through his steel-rimmed spectacles, and do the best expected of a civilian to understand it.

"This is the *Venturer's* present position," Hawke said, pointing at a small pencil cross to the west of the Scilly Islands. "And this," he added, "is our course;

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two-six-five degrees." His finger traced a line that had been drawn on the printed chart.

Dashwood raised his head from the chart table and looked over the fore end of the bridge down on to the frigate's forecandle. He noted the way in which her fine bows were cutting through the water, sending out razor-edged ripples to each side like the barbed head of an arrow. He could feel, too, the vibration of the multi-horsepower turbines beneath his feet.

"And you're going full speed now, eh, Hawke?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Thirty knots."

The captain went on to explain that the *Magician* had already been sighted and reported by a Shackleton of R.A.F. Coastal Command nearly half an hour ago. The missing submarine was being towed by the tug *Baron* on a westerly course at a speed estimated to be five knots. Hawke indicated the position of the aircraft sighting on the chart.

"That was her at six-thirty, sir. And this," he added, moving his finger a little to the west, "is her present position—at seven o'clock."

Grunting an acknowledgment of this information Dashwood picked up a pair of dividers and measured the distance between the respective positions of the *Venturer* and the *Magician*. "Less than twenty miles," he declared. "We should be sighting your submarine any minute now, Rockingham."

The professor could not entirely suppress his anxiety about the outcome of the operation. "But are you *sure* it will be *my* submarine this time, Admiral?" he asked. "Can you be certain it won't be another dummy?"

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The Third Sea Lord was not at all pleased to be reminded of the incident of the dummy *Magician*. "Brrumph!" he growled. "As certain as any man can be, Rockingham," he said. "Unless, of course, we've been led up the garden path by that ex-convict butler of Horncross's. And according to the police that's not likely. Fellow was too frightened for his own skin," they said. And there's another reason, Rockingham. Horncross—fellow who has the confounded nerve to call himself the Viper—he's on board that tug, so I'm told—with his wife. I don't believe they'd be there if it wasn't the real *Magician* this time."

When the admiral paused, Captain Hawke seized the chance to complete his explanation. "This third position," he said, indicating a further cross on the chart, "is the *Rawl*—the Paravianian destroyer, sir. She was also sighted by the R.A.F. Shackleton, close to the *Magician* and the *Baron*. Of course that's what we expected; the rendezvous was timed for seven o'clock."

That the destroyer and the tug with the submarine in tow had kept their rendezvous was at this moment confirmed by a signal which the *Venturer's* yeoman handed to her captain. "Another message from the Shackleton," Hawke said, reading it to his two passengers. "'Tug is preparing to transfer tow to destroyer.'"

At this news Dashwood's eyes flashed, and his anger might well have got the better of him, if his attention had not been diverted by a sudden report from the frigate's officer of the watch. "Ship in sight right ahead, sir," he cried, and added: "Looks like a destroyer."

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At once Hawke and Dashwood raised glasses to their eyes.

"Yes, Rockingham," declared the admiral, after a very brief pause, "It's a destroyer all right. The tug's there, too—and the *Magician*. Your *Magician*, Rockingham. Here, have a look for yourself."

As the professor took the glasses, and adjusted their focus to suit his own short sight, Dashwood continued: "They're about ten miles away now. Another twenty minutes and we'll be up with them." He rubbed his hands together with anticipation.

But the professor was not so happy. "Twenty minutes!" he repeated. "Then, if the tug is already transferring the tow, surely we shall be too late, Admiral?"

Dashwood shook his head vigorously. "No, no," he cried. "It'll take 'em longer, much longer, a good half-hour to do it."

"But if they should be quicker than that?" argued the scientist.

"Well—that would be deuced awkward, Rockingham," the Third Sea Lord admitted, "because once the *Magician's* flying the Paravianian flag—"

Dashwood broke off to swear an oath. "No; confound it! I'll not allow it's possible," he declared vehemently. "We're going to get your submarine back—and put that blackguard, Horncross, where he belongs, if it's the last thing I do. And we're doing it today, Rockingham—this morning."

* * *

On the bridge of the *Baron*, Horncross and his wife were watching the preparations that were being made

by her crew to transfer the tow from the tug to the *Rawl*. The tug and the destroyer were lying stopped about a hundred yards apart. And away astern of the *Baron*, at the end of the long wire hawser by which she had been towed from St. Mawgen, lay the *Magician*, motionless on a calm sea and, seemingly, devoid of life.

In this respect she contrasted sharply with the decks of the tug and the destroyer whose crews were very busy. The Paravanians were making ready a grass hawser which was to be passed to the *Baron*, there to be secured to the tow by the tug's crew. By this means the wire from the submarine would be transferred from the tug to the destroyer.

"Only another half hour," crowed Horncross, when Trenaman had explained the operation, "and we shall be finished. Success will be ours."

His wife, as always, was of a more practical turn of mind. "When do we collect the money?" she asked coldly.

"My dear Sybil!" responded Horncross, who understood his wife's attitude very well. "What do you take me for? Do you really suppose I would allow the *Magician* to be transferred to the *Rawl* unless I was certain that two million dollars would be credited by Paravania to our account in South America?"

Lady Sybil was more sceptical. "I shall believe that when I see the dollars," she said.

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In the control room of the *Magician* Tiger Ransome and Snort Kenton had spent most of the time since early dawn at the eye pieces of the submarine's twin periscopes. By this means they could see every-

thing that was going on without showing themselves on deck and giving away their presence on board. Now they were watching the *Rawl* preparing to take the tow from the tug.

"In twenty minutes—no more—the *Magician* will belong to Paravania, Tiger," Kenton announced, "unless we do something to stop it. But we've thought of nothing between us—nothing at all."

In a flat voice Ransome answered. "Nothing, Snort. I just don't know what we're to do."

Though they had spent much of their night racking their brains for a solution, neither had been able to conceive a way out of their dilemma.

"What I can't understand, Tiger," continued Kenton, "is why one of our ships hasn't put in an appearance by this time. Surely Alison and Barbara haven't let us down."

Ransome shook his head. "No," he said, "I'm quite sure they haven't. But it may take them longer than we expected to convince the police that their story's true."

"Well," responded Kenton gloomily, "once this boat is turned over to the *Rawl*, we've had it, Tiger. It'll be no good one of our ships turning up later today. They won't be able to do anything once the *Magician's* flying the Paravanian ensign."

"No," Ransome agreed. "And what's more, we shall have to give ourselves up because we've nothing to eat or drink."

Kenton sighed. "I'm thirsty already," he complained. "I'd give a lot for a spot of breakfast right now."

"So would I, Snort," Ransome answered. "Eggs, bacon, sausages and all. But this isn't the time to be thinking of our stomachs."

Kenton's face creased into a sardonic smile. "What else is there to do?" he queried.

Ransome seldom allowed himself to be pessimistic for very long. "Take one more look all round, Snort—all round the horizon," he said hopefully. "See if by any chance one of our ships is there after all."

Without waiting for Kenton to follow his example, he swung his own periscope round so that its lenses scanned the far horizon—and his optimism was rewarded. With a sudden whoop of delight, he cried: "All's well, Snort! All's well after all. There's a frigate about five miles away, coming up fast. And *it's one of ours!*"

Kenton did not need to swing his periscope to confirm his friend's announcement. "And the *Rawl's* seen her, Tiger," he crowed. The officers on her bridge are getting very excited about something. That must be the reason. And—" he paused. "Wait a minute—they're lowering a boat."

"Lowering a boat—now?" A puzzled Ransome turned his periscope on to the Paravianian destroyer. "What on earth for?"

"I don't know," responded Kenton. "It seems odd—and they're passing something into it."

"Yep, Snort," agreed Ransome. "It's a flag—a Paravianian ensign."

"What for? To fly in the boat?"

"No, it's too big for that. Hold on—the boat's coming this way." Ransome's voice rose to a higher

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pitch. "I know what they must be doing, Snort," he cried. "They're coming aboard the *Magician*!"

The excitement in Kenton's voice died. "Then our number's up, Tiger," he said.

Ransome shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I don't expect them to come below."

"Why not? What are they up to, then?"

"That ensign, Snort. I believe they're going to hoist it aboard this sub. without waiting to finish transferring the tow."

Kenton was thunderstruck. "Hoist the Paravian ensign?" he cried. "But that'll put the kibosh on everything. She'll be theirs before our frigate can possibly get here and stop them."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Tiger's expression was grim. But suddenly it changed, and his eyes lit up with excitement. Turning away from his periscope, he smashed his fist into the palm of his hand. "By jiminy, no, Snort!" he exclaimed. "They're not going to get away with it—turn this sub. over to Paravania under the very eyes of the British Navy simply by hoisting a piece of coloured bunting? Two can play at that game."

"What d'you mean, Tiger?"

"I'm wearing a red tie, and you're wearing a white shirt and a blue tie—"

"Well?"

"Take 'em off, Snort, take 'em off quickly and I'll explain everything..."

"Yes, we shall be there before the tug's transferred the tow," declared Admiral Dashwood as the *Venturer*

drove through the water towards her quarry at thirty knots. "The *Baron* won't be able to claim that the *Magician's* a Paravianian submarine."

Professor Rockingham's eyes sparkled behind his glasses. "How splendid, Admiral," he said. "How splendid."

"Yes, Rockingham, it will indeed be splendid when—"

Dashwood broke off abruptly. Something moving alongside the *Rawl* caught his eye. He levelled his glasses on the destroyer. "Hello!" he exclaimed. "I wonder what that boat's doing?"

Captain Hawke, who was also using glasses from his position at the *Venturer's* compass, answered, after a brief pause, "Looks as if they're going to board the *Magician*, sir."

"The deuce they are!" ejaculated the Third Sea Lord. "What on earth for?"

An agitated Rockingham interjected: "They won't have time to go below, Admiral, surely—to examine the machinery—before we—?"

Dashwood cut short the scientist's query. "Certainly not, Rockingham," he announced. "We'll have 'em out of her long before they learn the secret of your nuclear reactor and your aqua jet."

This certainly seemed to be true because Captain Hawke was already reducing the *Venturer's* speed prior to stopping his ship in the vicinity of the *Magician*. The high-pitched whine of the frigate's turbines had dropped to a low hum and the wind no longer whistled through her rigging.

"D'you want the boarding party sent over at once,

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sir," Hawke asked the Third Sea Lord, "as soon as we've stopped? "

" Please," Dashwood answered. " I don't know what that Paravianian boat is up to, but the sooner we wrinkle them out of our submarine the better. After that I shall have a few crisp words with the captain of the *Rawl*. I shall tell him—"

But Rockingham never learned what the admiral intended to say to the Paravianian captain. The rest of his sentence was drowned by a series of orders issuing from the frigate's loudspeakers. The whaler was being called away and the boarding party ordered to fall in.

This disturbance was followed by a silence in which Dashwood and the professor watched the *Rawl's* boat go alongside the *Magician*. They saw two men board her, one of them carrying a bundle under his arm. He climbed into the conning tower and, to the surprise of those on the frigate's bridge, began to swarm up one of the periscope standards.

They did not have to wait long to learn his purpose. As the *Venturer's* engines shuddered astern in order to check her way, Admiral Dashwood exploded with an oath.

" Rockets and starshell! " he bellowed. " D'you see that, Rockingham? D'you see what those blackguards are doing? They've stolen a march on us, Rockingham. They're hoisting the Paravianian ensign in the *Magician's* bow."

He turned to the captain. " Belay your boarding party, Hawke. We can't do anything now except argue with the *Rawl's* captain. Technically, for the moment

—until we can prove otherwise, which we can't—the *Magician's* a Paravianian submarine. That's what he'll claim."

"But, Admiral—" pleaded an appalled professor.

"It's no good, Rockingham," was the answer. "We can't board her now. We can't risk an incident on the high seas contrary to International Law—not with the Paravianians. You know what they are; always out to make trouble. They'd take the affair to the United Nations; and you know what that means."

"Of course, but—"

"There are no buts, Rockingham," the Third Sea Lord declared. "It's one of the penalties of living in the twentieth century. We can't face a charge of piracy, for all that we might plead the *Magician* was stolen from us—because it wasn't stolen by the *Rawl*." The admiral squared his shoulders, as if facing up to the worst. "No, I'm afraid the only satisfaction we shall get out of today is arresting that tug," he declared, "and this Viper fellow, always supposing he doesn't have the wit to seek sanctuary aboard the *Rawl*. If he does that we shall be completely stymied."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“

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“D’YOU MEAN we shall never recover my submarine?” The professor was so nearly in tears at this possibility that he had to take off his glasses and wipe the lenses clear.

To Admiral Dashwood such a suggestion was a challenge. “Never recover it?” he exclaimed. “Of course we shall, Rockingham. How? Blowed if I know. But to the Navy nothing’s impossible, nothing.”

The Third Sea Lord turned to the captain of the *Venturer*. “I’ll be obliged if you’ll move your ship close alongside that destroyer, Hawke. I’ll have the satisfaction of giving her captain a piece of my mind if I get nothing else out of this affair today.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” The frigate’s captain began manoeuvring her engines to comply with the admiral’s orders.

Soon the *Venturer* was so close to the *Rawl* that the swarthy faces of her crew were clearly visible. This included her captain on his bridge.

“Look at the fellow,” Dashwood growled. “Wears a moustache. A moustache, Rockingham! Shows what sort of a navy he belongs to.”

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Then: "Rawl ahoy!" he bellowed through the *Venturer's* loudspeaker. "D'you understand English? I say again, d'you understand English?"

After a moment's pause a voice answered through a loudspeaker on the destroyer's bridge: "*Ya doperingy poshit sta lobo na Paravanit!*"

The Third Sea Lord tried again. "This is a British admiral speaking," he bawled. "I don't understand Paravanian."

"*Ya doperingy poshit sta lobo na Paravanit,*" again came back at him.

Dashwood stamped his foot on the steel deck of the *Venturer's* bridge. "Oh, blast the fellow!" he swore. Then he spoke again through the loud-hailer. "I heard you the first time. I want to talk to you in English!"

Once more the *Rawl* answered: "*Ya doperingy poshit sta lobo na Paravanit.*"

Dashwood's face reddened. Only with difficulty did he control his temper. "If he says that again..." he growled. Then he turned to the *Venturer's* captain. "I suppose you've nobody aboard who speaks Paravanian, Hawke?"

"No, sir."

"Then I'll have to try French though mine isn't particularly good. *Parlez-vous Français? Je désire parler avec votre capitaine!*"

"*Ya Paravanit! Ya Paravanit!*"

This useless reply was almost too much for the admiral, but somehow he managed to keep a grip on his feelings. "Oh, this is impossible," he declared. "I'll give the blighter five minutes to find someone who can speak our lingo. If not, I'll—I'll—."

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But just what Admiral Dashwood would do to the captain of the *Rawl* was never to be disclosed. He was suddenly interrupted by a sharp cry from the captain of the *Venturer*. "Admiral, sir! The *Magician*. Look! "

The urgency in Hawke's voice was enough to make both Dashwood and Rockingham switch their attention from the Paravianian destroyer to the submarine. Something, certainly, was happening on board her. Two figures had appeared in the *Magician's* conning tower, two men who certainly weren't the Paravianians who had boarded her. In the first place the *Rawl's* boat was now on her way back to the destroyer; and the two new figures now to be seen aboard the *Magician*, one dark, one fair, were clearly much younger, when viewed through glasses. Where *had* they come from?

Much more important, what were they doing?

"One of them's climbing the periscope! " exclaimed the professor.

Dashwood could hardly refrain from cheering "Yes, man—to haul down the Paravianian ensign. See! "

It was Rockingham's turn to voice his excitement. "And they're hoisting something else' instead, Admiral. It looks like—good heavens! it looks like a shirt! "

The Third Sea Lord smote the *Venturer's* bridge rail with the palm of his hand. "A shirt! A shirt! Why the deuce should they—? Rockets and starshell! It's not a shirt, man."

"Then, what—"

"Look at it, Rockingham! Look at it! The finest

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sight in the world. A bit crude, perhaps. Home-made if you like, but it's none the worse for that."

The finest sight in the world! The professor recognised it now. Flying clear from one of the *Magician's* periscope standards was the White Ensign of the Royal Navy.

"But who are those two men, Admiral?" queried Rockingham, "And where have they—?"

Dashwood brushed such problems aside. "We shall learn that soon enough," he answered, "because there's nothing to stop us boarding the *Magician* now. She's under the White Ensign. That means she belongs to the Navy again."

The admiral turned to the *Venturer's* captain "Get your boarding party away as quickly as you can, Hawke," he ordered. "I want 'em aboard the *Magician* before the *Rawl* can send their boat back to her. That's the only danger now."

Standing on the conning-tower of the *Magician* and flushed with excitement at the success of their stratagem, Tiger Ransome and Snort Kenton looked proudly at the White Ensign they had made out of Snort's white shirt and their blue and red ties.

"It may be a bit crude, Snort," murmured Ransome, "a bit rough and ready, but it's better, far better, than any Paravianian flag."

"By jingo, yes," Kenton readily agreed, "because it means the *Magician's* back in the British Navy. We've turned the tables on the *Rawl*. We've scuppered Horn-cross's dirty game. Now all we have to do is to wait until the *Venturer's* boat arrives. It's on its way."

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Ransome answered quietly: "And stand by to repel boarders, Snort."

Kenton looked surprised. "Boarders? Where from?"

Ransome raised a hand and pointed towards the Paravianian destroyer. "The *Rawl's* boat. It's coming back," he said. "It'll be here before the *Venturer's* whaler."

Kenton saw that what his friend had said was true. Hailed by the captain of the destroyer, the Paravianian boat had turned and was being pulled back towards the *Magician* as quickly as its crew could handle their oars. Smaller and lighter than the *Venturer's* whaler, with its armed boarding party, it must reach the submarine first.

But the two sub-lieutenants were not the only people to see this new development, with the result that much happened in the course of the next ten minutes for all of which Ransome and Kenton had a grandstand view from the *Magician's* conning-tower.

At first they watched while the two boats came towards them, the *Rawl's* dinghy and the *Venturer's* whaler, and wondered if there was any chance of the British one reaching the submarine first. They guessed that the *Rawl's* men intended to tear down the White Ensign and rehoist their own flag. But to do that they would have to climb into the conning tower, and Tiger and Snort reckoned they would not have much difficulty in repulsing them. It should be easy to push them overboard as they climbed up the vertical ladder on the outside of the conning tower—unless, of course, the Paravianians were armed.

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That was a very real possibility—and the most worrying one for Tiger and Snort, which was why they hoped that, somehow, the *Venturer's* boat would reach the *Magician*, if not first, at least very soon after the boat from the *Rawl*. The British boarding party, which they could see in the frigate's whaler, would outnumber the Paravanians by more than two to one. Perhaps the lieutenant in charge of the *Venturer's* whaler had realised the danger; certainly he was urging his crew to do their utmost, to pull as hard as they possibly could, so that they might reach the *Magician* in time.

Horncross, anxiously watching developments from the bridge of the *Baron*, also appreciated the danger of this. He had suffered a severe shock when he had seen the Paravianian ensign torn from the *Magician's* periscope, to be replaced by the White Ensign, and realised that the young men responsible for doing this were none other than the two sub-lieutenants whom he had supposed locked out of harm's way in the turret room at Mullion Hall.

And now it looked as if the Royal Navy was going to succeed in its attempt to recapture the submarine. He hailed the *Rawl*. The destroyer had the guns to stop the *Venturer's* whaler, he said—and she was a match for the frigate herself, if need be.

Unfortunately for him, the *Rawl's* captain had other ideas. Risk an international incident with the British? Was Horncross mad, he demanded volubly. Britain and Paravania were not at war, and he was not all that sure that the *Rawl* would be successful in a fight with the *Venturer*. His destroyer might have more and big-

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ger guns, but British seamen were never beaten, as he had good reason to know. Had Horncross never read the story of the little *Revenge*—or of the fight of the *Ajax*, *Achilles* and *Exeter* against the *Graf Spee*?

Infuriated by the timid attitude of the *Rawl*'s captain, Horncross was reduced to shaking both his fists at the heavens. But not for long. If the *Rawl* would do nothing, he would have to take action himself. The *Baron* was his tug: he could do what he wanted with her, and though she was not armed, she was more than a match for a flimsy wooden whaler.

"Trenaman!" he roared suddenly. "Go for the *Venturer*'s boat. Cut her off before she can reach the *Magician*. Stop them boarding her!"

But the skipper promptly protested; what about the tow, two hundred fathoms of wire hawser still secured between the *Baron* and the submarine? The tug could not be manoeuvred to cut off the *Venturer*'s whaler so long as that was there.

"Then slip the tow," cried Horncross. "Slip it, man!"

Something in his tone banished further argument. "Okay, guv'nor, okay," Trenaman answered, and bawled the order aft to his mate.

To knock off the tongue of the big slip was only the work of moments. As soon as he saw the end of the wire disappear over the *Baron*'s stern, Trenaman moved the tug's telegraphs himself. With her diesel engines thudding, she began to pick up speed. And Trenaman conned her in the direction of the narrowing gap which separated the *Venturer*'s whaler from the *Magician*.

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Lady Sybil was not satisfied with this plan. "Why don't you sink that boat?" she sneered. "That's the only way to make sure she never reaches the *Magician*."

This suggestion startled Horncross. Such action might well kill or drown some of the British boarding party, and for all his defects, murder was not amongst his crimes.

"Sink her?" he echoed hollowly.

Lady Horncross ground her heel into the wooden deck of the tug's bridge. "Yes, sink her," she snapped. "But you won't do that," she went on acidly. "Oh, no. And I'll tell you why: because you're yellow, Ralph; as yellow as they make 'em when it comes to—"

Angrily Horncross interrupted her furious tirade. "Yellow am I?" he snarled. "I'll show you whether I'm yellow. Skipper! That boat—"

Trenaman, standing beside him on the tug's bridge, lifted his bushy eyebrows in a question mark. "Aye?"

Horncross clapped him across the shoulder blades. "Ram her, man," he cried. "Sink her! That's the way to stop that boat getting to the *Magician*. My wife says so. Didn't you hear her?"

On the British frigate's bridge Admiral Dashwood guessed what was in Horncross's mind as soon as he saw the tug begin to move in the direction of the whaler. "Rockets and starshell!" he expostulated. "When I get my hands on that crook—!"

Captain Hawke was more practical. "I'm not having one of my boats run down by that tug," he said, and ordered; "Full ahead both engines. Starboard twenty."

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Almost immediately the frigate began to gather way and to swing in the direction of the *Baron*.

"By jingo!" cried the Third Sea Lord. "You're going to take your ship across that tug's bows. Get between her and your whaler; is that the idea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man." Dashwood gripped the professor by the arm. "D'you see what's happening, Rockingham?"

The distinguished physicist nodded his head vigorously. Accustomed to the peace of his laboratory, he was not used to such exciting events, but he could not resist the thrill of them. "I think so, Admiral," he said. "I think so. But shall we be in time?"

Would the *Venturer* indeed be in time to head off the *Baron*, to stop her sinking the British ship's whaler? Professor Rockingham was not the only man asking that question. Snort Kenton put it to his friend as they continued to watch the scene unfold before them, from the *Magician's* conning tower.

"It'll be touch and go, Snort," was Ransome's reply, "whether the *Venturer* manages to cross the *Baron's* bow before she—"

Then there was a new development. "The *Rawl's* dinghy, Tiger," Kenton suddenly cut in. "They've stopped pulling. They don't like the look of things." "They're waiting until the *Baron's* dealt with the *Venturer's* whaler, if you ask me."

Kenton sniffed. "Well, it gives us a breathing spell, anyway," he said. "We shan't have to repel boarders—not yet, anyway."

This development also allowed the two subs. to con-

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concentrate all their attention on the *Baron* as she thudded towards the whaler. The lieutenant in charge of her was urging his crew to pull for their lives towards the *Magician*.

All this time the *Venturer* was driving through the water with ever increasing speed towards the narrowing gap that divided the tug from the boat. Another minute would decide whether the frigate could save the whaler from being rammed and allow it to reach the *Magician* safely.

Horncross realised how little there was separating him from success or failure. Gnawing his finger-nails in his anxiety, he stared at the whaler on the tug's star-board bow and the frigate to port. He had no eyes for anything else, so that it was his wife who told him:

"The *Rawl*, Ralph! Stop her! She's leaving us."

Horncross swung round in the destroyer's direction. The water under her stern had been churned into foam by her screws, and she had swung away to the westward. Her captain must have decided that the *Venturer's* intentions were too aggressive for his liking. He preferred to get away before the British could turn their attention to him.

This unexpected development almost overwhelmed Horncross. Now what was he to do? What good would it do to rehoist the Paravianian flag in the *Magician* if the *Rawl* had fled? But he was not changing his intentions to stop the frigate's whaler from boarding the submarine. If nothing else, he'd have his revenge on those two interfering busybodies who had done so much to wreck his scheme.

His angry thoughts were interrupted by the shrill

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blast of the *Venturer's* siren. She was so close now that the sound almost deafened him.

It was followed by a cry of alarm from Trenaman. "We b'ain't going to do it, guv'nor!" cried the skipper. "We b'ain't going to do it! That blamed frigate..."

But Horncross was only interested in the whaler. "Never mind the frigate," he snapped in reply. "It's her boat you've got to sink."

Trenaman seized the tug's telegraphs. "We won't sink 'er if—" he began, then changed his tone to an urgent cry: "Hard-a-starboard!" At the same time he rang down 'stop engines' on the *Baron's* telegraphs.

"What the blazes are you doing?" Horncross cried.

"I'm trying to save my tug," answered Trenaman.

Captain Hawke had intended to do no more than cut across the *Baron's* bows and so stop her from ramming the whaler. He had supposed that the tug's skipper would not risk a collision; at the last moment he would surely sheer off and give the warship best.

That indeed was Trenaman's intention, and Horncross would, perhaps, have realised that to go on and be rammed by the frigate was the ultimate folly.

But Lady Horncross was made of different metal. She, at least, would not allow the prize to be snatched from their grasp. In one quick stride she was at the tug's telegraphs, jerking the handle back to "full speed ahead." In one further step she reached the wheel. She pushed the startled helmsman to one side, and swung the wheel back to amidships. The *Baron*, after a brief check and a slight swing to starboard, came back to her original course and thudded on.



The ship bore down on the tug

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Trenaman was so startled by Lady Sybil's action that it was several seconds before he recovered himself and moved to exert his authority. By then it was too late. Captain Hawke might swear at the tug for the skipper's foolish action but he could not now check his own ship's way in time, nor could he swing her out of the path of the *Baron*. He could only grip the compass binnacle hard as his ship bore down on the tug with the speed of an express train and order, "Full astern both engines," just as the *Venturer's* bows crashed into the *Baron* amidships.

Admiral Dashwood and Professor Rockingham, hypnotised by the suddenness of the disaster, heard the last despairing cries from the tug's bridge.

From Horncross: "She's going to cut us down!"

From a hysterical Lady Sybil: "Oh, no, Ralph! No!"

And from Trenaman: "Jump for your lives! Jump for your lives!"

Then, with a rending crunch of splintering wood and steel, the *Baron* heeled over on her beam ends, and the *Venturer* rode right over the tug and sent her plunging to the bottom.

A few minutes later Tiger Ransome and Short Kenton were watching the *Venturer's* whaler searching for survivors of the accident. They could afford to wait for the frigate's boarding party now. There was nothing to be seen except the *Venturer* and her whaler.

The fast disappearing *Rawl* (which had not forgotten to take her dinghy with her) was already only a smudge on the horizon, and all that remained of the tug *Baron* was a few pieces of floating wreckage.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Fair Reward

TWO DAYS later Ransome and Kenton were back in St. Margen. They had to pick up Tiger's car before returning to their homes, and they also had to see Alison and Barbara, to tell them the full story of how the *Magician* had been recovered, and to thank them for the part they had played in bringing the affair to a successful conclusion.

The two sub-lieutenants went up to Mullion Hall for lunch, where in the oak panelled dining room, they enjoyed a meal for which Alison and Barbara had been largely responsible. Between mouthfuls Snort assured the girls that it was all Tiger's idea, making a White Ensign to hoist on the submarine's periscope instead of the Paravianian flag. And Tiger responded, nonsense, Snort had done just as much as he had to capture the *Magician*, if not more. Why, it was Snort who had climbed the periscope standard and changed the flags! That needed courage because, for all they knew at the time, the Paravianians might have risked shooting him rather than lose the submarine.

But the quartet did not argue about this for long because Alison and Barbara were united in their praise

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for both young men. And that prompted Tiger and Snort to give unqualified thanks for the courage shown by the two girls. If they had not made their way out of the tunnel and reported what had happened to the police, the *Venturer* would never have appeared at Horncross's rendezvous. In that case the *Magician* would now be on her way across the Atlantic to Paravania; and Tiger and Snort would, in all probability, be prisoners on board the *Rawl*! It was very fortunate for them that the whole affair had not ended that way: as it was it had been quite an adventure for them all.

"And so," said Alison, "after picking up survivors from the tug, the *Venturer* was able to tow the *Magician* into Plymouth."

"Yep," Ransome replied. "She put her safely into Devonport dockyard. They started the job of completing her yesterday. She'll be commissioned for service next month."

"I bet Professor Rockingham's pleased," commented Barbara, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

"I'll say he was," agreed Kenton. "So was the Third Sea Lord. And no wonder. She's just about the most important thing our Navy's developed since the war. Really top secret. If Paravania had—" * *

Alison interrupted him, her manner suddenly serious. "Yes we know, Snort," she said. "We'll never be able to forget that Uncle Ralph and Aunt Sybil—our guardians—were willing to sell that secret to Paravania. They were traitors; that's the worst part for us, isn't it, Barbara?"

"Yes," agreed her sister, "much worse than knowing they'd been crooks for years."

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Ransome, serious in his turn for a change, commented: "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but perhaps it's as well your aunt and uncle weren't among the survivors from the *Baron*."

Barbara nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, Tiger," she said quietly, "I think it is."

"So do I," agreed Alison. "They'd have hated going to prison, especially Aunt Sybil."

"And they weren't really kind to us," added her sister, "Not really."

Kenton said: "I'm glad to hear you say that, Barbara, because Tiger and I felt pretty awful about it at one time."

They did not sustain this serious note for very long, however. There were other questions which had still to be answered. There was, for example, the problem of the bullion which the British Government had paid for the recovery of the dummy *Magician*. This, Tiger and Snort learned from the girls, had all been recovered. The police had discovered the cave down in Rackstone Cove in which it had been stored. Alison and Barbara had themselves seen it being loaded into a couple of railway wagons. For the first time since the war, the railway spur through the tunnel under Hangman's Hill had been used for a lawful purpose instead of for furthering Horncross's evil schemes.

There was also the problem of Wiggs Poston. "What's happened to him?" Snort queried.

Barbara chuckled. "That old villain!" she said. "Oh, the police have got him."

"But surely he turned Queen's evidence," Ransome argued.

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"They're only keeping him as a witness for the trial of the members of the gang who were saved from the tug," Alison answered. "After that they'll let him go."

"But not," declared Barbara, "to return here."

"I should hope not!" was Tiger's emphatic reply.

Alison looked thoughtful. "You see," she said, "Mullion Hall will have to be sold. Uncle Ralph's solicitor came over from Truro yesterday to see us. He says it's the only way to pay the debts."

"Yes," added Barbara, "isn't it a shame? We'd begun to like this place. We wanted to live here."

Kenton looked at his friend and received a quick wink in reply. Then, to the surprise of both girls, he said, "And so you shall live here, Barbara—Alison—both of you, if you want to."

"What d'you mean, Snort?" The question came from the elder girl. "How can we?"

"You needn't sell Mullion Hall if you don't want to," Kenton replied.

"Of course we don't want to," Barbara declared, "but if we haven't enough money . . ."

Ransome, his eyes twinkling with amusement, interrupted her. "But you have," he declared, "plenty of money."

"That's not what the solicitor said."

"Ah! But we know better. Admiral Dashwood told us."

"Admiral Dashwood?" queried Barbara. "What's he got to do with it?"

Quietly Kenton answered: "The Admiralty offered a reward of ten thousand pounds for information that

A Fair Reward

would lead to the recovery of the *Magician*. The Government offered another ten thousand for recovering the gold. Twenty thousand pounds altogether."

"Yes, we know," Alison interjected, "but that will be yours, Snort—and Tiger's."

Ransome shook his head. "No," he said. "Naval officers aren't allowed to accept official rewards."

Kenton added: "So it's all yours, Alison—and Barbara—between you. And twenty thousand pounds should be enough to save Mullion Hall."

At this unexpected revelation, the two girls were for a moment silent. They found it very hard to believe their good fortune. Barbara was the first to speak. "What simply wonderful news," she cried.

"It's the best news we've had for years," her sister agreed.

Ransome said at once: "We're very glad to hear you say that—really glad, aren't we, Snort?"

"Yes, Tiger—" Kenton turned to the girls—"because we owe you both for something which is very important for us. If you hadn't decided to spend your Easter holiday sailing, and so given us a chance to rescue you, we should never have got first class certificates in our seamanship exam."

"And," added Tiger, "we shouldn't now be sub-lieutenants. We should still be mere snotties."

Alison rose from the table. "Sub-lieutenants or admirals," she said, "—we hope you'll both be admirals one day—you'll always be Tiger and Snort to us."

"Rather," cried Barbara, "and whenever you have leave, we hope you'll come down here and stay with us in Mullion Hall."

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Ransome looked at his friend. "To that invitation I think there's only one answer, eh, Snort?"

"By jove, yes, Tiger," Kenton agreed. "Of course we'll come."

"That goes for both of us," Ransome added, before his smile changed to an expression of mock seriousness. "There's one reservation, though."

"What's that, Tiger?" queried Alison, and her sister echoed her words.

Tiger was not alone in giving the reply: Snort joined him in a cheerful chorus. "No more missing submarines," they said. "Maybe all went well this time. But next time..."

Though they broke off, leaving their sentence unfinished, the two girls knew quite well what they were thinking. Perhaps it was an exciting adventure to look back on, but it might so easily have ended in disaster for them all.

So they echoed their agreement. "Definitely not," they said together. "No more missing submarines."

